STAR CAT
BOOK THREE: WAR MAGE
ANDREW MACKAY

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Annotation

Our universe is a mother. Don't be fooled by her adorable exterior. The heart of a vicious killer lies within Jelly Anderson. Soon, she'll be fighting for two… It impregnated her with a gift she must protect at all costs. Jelly and her crew on Space Opera Beta are outnumbered and outgunned. Aliens have invaded the ship and are on the hunt for fresh blood. They're waiting for their sister ship to come and save them. Rescue or death. Only one will come first. The crew will train Jelly to defend herself. Wool will teach her to suppress her catty instincts. Jaycee will teach her how to use weapons. Bonnie will teach her how to kick ass. It's their only shot at survival. In training an animal, they may have created a monster. Prey is about to become predator. Jelly Anderson came to save the universe and kick some ass. Now, she's all out of universe… Scroll up and one click Star Cat 3: War Mage right now. The young adult sci-fi action behemoth that sinks its claws in and refuses to let go… The STAR CAT Series: Star Cat: Infinity Claws Star Cat 2: Pink Symphony Star Cat 3: War Mage Star Cat 4: Killer Instinct (Coming Soon: July 2018.) Star Cat: Origins - The short story prequel (Download this book for FREE here: bit.ly/CVBSubscribe)

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STAR CAT

WAR MAGE

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CHAPTER ONE

"We discover, adapt and create.
Acting on our discoveries is all we have.
Let us not regret our indecisions."

Pascal D'Souza

(2056–2111)

* * *

Botanix

Space Opera Beta – Level Three

Dozens of Shanta creatures snaked through the broken Botanix wall. Tripp, Bonnie, and Jaycee lifted their firearms and prepared to blast the creatures to smithereens.

"What did Wool say?" Bonnie turned to Tripp. "What's up with Jelly?"

He hooked his finger around the trigger and prepared to take a shot at an incoming creature, "She's pregnant."

BAM-SPLATCH!

Tripp blasted the Shanta's slit open. The beast exploded, tossing its twelve severed limbs in all directions.

"*What*?" Bonnie tore her gaze away from the bullet-storm, "Say that again?"

"I said Jelly's pregnant," Tripp shouted over the gunfire.

"God damn it, there's thousands of them," Jaycee thumped the side of his floor-mounted K-SPARK turret. The meter on the side of the barrel displayed a rapidly reducing ammunition level, "Less than five hundred rounds. I figure we have two minutes before we're outnumbered."

BAM-BAM-BAM!

The turret swung back and forth, firing at the swathes of Shanta creatures scuttling along the ground, walls, and ceiling.

Several of the disgusting beasts exploded. Their pink gore splattered the already-desecrated rows of plants.

Jaycees finally processed the revelation, “Wait a minute? *Pregnant*?”

“That’s what Wool said,” Tripp flung his empty Rez-9 magazine at the creatures, “That’s it, I’m out.”

Thousands of Shanta scurried over the sandy horizon towards the ship. Tripp threw his gun at them. They tussled over each other in an attempt to grab it with their talons.

The water dispenser that Tor and Jelly had taken cover behind earlier caught Tripp’s attention.

“Jaycee, we need to get out of here but the door might not hold them back. Come and help me.”

“You got it.”

“I got you covered, go,” Bonnie slammed her Cortex K-12 leg into her palms. The end of her boot slid open and released five canon-barreled toes, “Come and get some, you ugly sonofabitches!”

THRAA-TA-AAA-ATT-TT!

The bullets shredded through the limbs of the dozen-strong Shanta. Most slumped to the floor and bled their internal fluids into the five-inch pool of fresh water on the ground.

“I can’t hold them off much longer,” Bonnie palmed the lever on the side of her leg, “Reloading.”

Tripp watched Jaycee grab the sides of the water dispenser, “Do it.”

“I am, I am,” the great hunk of android wrestled with the unit, “It’s heavy.”

“So are you.”

“Yeah, but I’m not attached to the wall, am I?”

BAM-BAM-BAM-CLICK-CLICK-CLICK…

The mounted K-SPARK turret emptied its final magazine into the hordes of creatures and clicked into nothingness. The oscillator function whirred down to a close.

“That’s it, we’re outnumbered *and* outgunned,” Tripp shouted at Bonnie.

CLUNK-SCHLAMM!

Jaycee wrenched the water unit from the wall with an almighty crunch, “Got it. Stand back.”

A hefty, continuous blast of pure water splashed over Jaycee as he turned around with the unit in his arms, “Go on, get out of here. Now.”

Bonnie stomped her Cortex K-12 limb rifle to the floor and darted over to the door, “Let’s get outta here.”

Tripp took one last look at the hungry creatures. They shrieked

and jumped from the white sand and flooded Botanix, “Jaycee?”

He slammed the unit to the ground beside the door and thumped the compartment on the side of his leg, “Yeah?”

“You coming?”

The Botanix door slid open. Bonnie hopped through it and beckoned Tripp to join her, “Come on, quick.”

“You want them to spread through Opera Beta like a damn virus?” Jaycee took out a sliver of wire from the cavern in his leg. He wound it around the one hand he had left and attached it to the water unit.

“I’ll take my chances on sealing these bastards in here, thanks.”

Tripp stepped back through the door, “No, but—”

SCREEEEEEEEE!

A Shanta extended each of its twelve limbs and used the back four to launch itself at Jaycee.

“Christ, get out of there,” Bonnie said.

Jaycee snapped the wire taut and kicked himself away from the unit.

SCHWIPP!

The wire lifted up and juddered to a halt in mid-air.

SCHTING-SCHTING-SCHTANG!

The creature spun its limbs around like a carnival ride and extended its talons. It smashed against the wall in two halves having been dissected by the goo-drenched wire.

“Jeeez,” Tripp slammed the panel on the other end of the door, trying to close it, “C’mon, c’mon, *close*.”

“Wait up,” Jaycee bounded toward the door as it began to close.

“Let’s go, come on,” Tripp held his hand through the closing door as Jaycee stomped towards it, “There’s another one behind you.”

If Jaycee had stopped to look over his shoulder, he’d have seen a fifteen-foot Shanta fan all its limbs out like a giant, fleshy cobweb.

Tripp saw the bicycle-like monstrosity as Jaycee bolted towards the door, “Oh, oh, *damn*.”

Jaycee’s palm slammed into Tripp’s, “Gotcha.”

“Get the hell of here, now.”

Tripp yanked Jaycee through the door and slammed the panel on the wall.

The Shanta fanned its limbs out like a cartwheel and rolled toward the door, “Screeeeeee—”

SCHWIP-SCHA-JUNT!

Jaycee fell to the floor and tugged on the wire. The gossamer-thin strip wound taut. The door slammed down on it, yanking the water unit across the floor. It crashed against the creature’s front two limbs, shattering the bones and flesh. The force knocked the cartwheeled

vision of death onto its side. It squealed in pain as the rest of the Shanta stampeded over it.

BOOM.

The door slammed shut, providing a fantastic view of the utter chaos behind the window.

BOP-BOP-SLAM!

Bonnie stepped back and held out her hands, “I don’t want to be here, anymore.”

“You *don’t* say,” Tripp offered Jaycee his hand, “Get up, soldier.”

Jaycee climbed to his feet and brushed his exo-suit down. He detached the wire from his belt and moved to the window with great curiosity, “What the hell *are* those things?”

Tripp couldn’t provide an explanation, “I have no idea.”

Jaycee reached into the compartment in his leg and took out a red dumb bomb. He teased the pin with his thumb, “Do I have your permission to toss this in Botanix and buy us some time?”

“If you do, we lose oxygen—”

“—Are you out of your mind, Healy?” Jaycee stomped his boot to the floor. The arsenal inside his leg compartment rattled around.

“Have you seen the state of Botanix? It’s as good as over, anyway.”

“But the oxygen?” Bonnie asked. “We’re screwed without it.”

Jaycee turned to the window once again. The Shanta chewed and ravaged their way through the charcoaled plants and soil and bashed against the door.

“You’re forgetting one thing,” Jaycee flicked the pin from the dumb bomb. The lights lit up and the device armed itself, “We don’t need oxygen. We’re *Androgynes*.”

Jaycee grabbed the lip of the door and pulled it across its slider. “Nggggg…”

Biddip-biddip-biddip-beeeep.

“Go to Medix and find Wool. Go, go,” Jaycee tossed the live dumb bomb through the ten-inch gap in the door.

Tripp and Bonnie shot off down the walkway.

Jaycee to pushed the door shut. The Shanta backed away from the beeping device rolling around the floor. One of them crouched on its front four limbs. Its top ‘arms’ bent over and tried to pick it up the rolling grenade.

“Screeeeeeee,” another shouted when realizing what the device was.

KA-BLOICK!

The dumb bomb exploded. A torrent of pink gloop splattered up inside of the door’s window. Jaycee caught sight of his severed left hand in the window as he tried to flip them the bird. Unfortunately,

no hand – no fingers.

"Bon appetite, you ugly bastards."

He turned around and raced up the walkway where Tripp and Bonnie had gone moments earlier.

CHAPTER TWO

Tor sprinted across the level three walkway and pressed his fingertips along the red mark around his neck. The Decapidisc had turned the skin on his neck raw during the time he wore it. The mark resembled a choker. The pain was very real; an unfailing reminder of just how unpopular he was with the Opera Beta crew.

"Where did that damn cat go?"

He scanned the staircase looking for her. The emergency strip lights on the floor provided limited visibility in the darkness.

"Jelly? Where are you?"

His footsteps echoed along the metal gantry as he made his way to the staircase.

No sign of her.

"Miew," came a familiar cry on the descent to level four.

"Jelly?" Tor hollered once again and placed his boot on the top step, "It's okay, I won't hurt you. Where are you?"

Jelly's light whimpers crept up the staircase. Tor gripped the railing and made his descent.

Her continued whining indicated her close proximity.

"Jelly, I know you're here—Whoa!"

He tripped up and tumbled to the halfway turn in the staircase. His shoulder blades slapped against the ground, forcing him onto his side.

He blinked a couple of times and caught sight of Jelly on all fours, snuggled against the fifth step.

"Miew," she cowered.

"You vicious *pussy*," Tor kicked himself back, uneasy at the sight of Jelly's cat-like face, "What are you looking at me like that for?"

Her ears pricked up. Somehow, she looked more human than she did not ten minutes ago.

"Hisss…"

"Okay, okay," Tor pushed himself to his knees and stood up straight. He held out his arms and took a step forward.

Jelly revealed her incisors. She flapped her tongue and began to purr – this time, not in a friendly way. An intense growl rumbled through her body as she backed up the next available step, "H-Hate you."

Tor threatened to scoop her up, "I'm not the bad guy, Jelly. I know you think I am, but I'm not."

"Grrr…"

She climbed onto the next step and hissed at him again. Her beautiful, flowing hair fell down her back. She demanded freedom.

"*Grrr…*" she bushed her tail out and slapped it against the step.

"Come on, sweetie—"

Jelly's face pulled back as she roared at him. A scary-looking half-cat, half-girl. Frozen solid with his arms outstretched he finally processed the vision of perversion in front of him.

"What *happened* to you, girl?"

"*Hate* you," Jelly's six-year-old girl's voice croaked as she spoke. She extended her infinity claws and ran them across the step. The screeching noise and was unbearable.

"We have to get you back to Medix," Tor failed to grasp the bizarre nature of having to negotiate that with a *sort of* cat, "Wool says something is happening to you."

"Stay back," Jelly hopped up the next three steps. She entered a shaft of light billowing in from the level three walkway.

Tor clamped eyes on her face. A moment ago she looked like a cat with a human face. Now, in the unmistakable harsh light, the opposite was true. A girl with cat-like features. Her Titanium whiskers fizzed and sparked.

Her ears remained further up the side of her head, unlike a human's. Her nose had protruded into human form. A strange, pink hue bleached out from under the white sheet she held against her body.

"I go," she meowed, "You stay."

"You want me to stay here? In the staircase?"

"Away from *the gift*."

Tor looked at her belly and swallowed hard, "What is that you're doing?"

Jelly turned around and climbed the six remaining steps. Her tail swished around as she bolted across the walkway.

"No, come back," Tor grabbed the rail and hoisted himself up the steps, "Jelly, *please*. They'll kill me if I lose you."

Jelly scrambled on all-fours along the metal grilles. The walkway shifted around and began to vibrate. She stopped and pressed the side of her body against the wall in protest, "Miew…"

Frightened, she scanned at her surroundings. Her paws vibrated up a storm and shifted along the floor. The movement had nothing to do with her, though – the ship had come to life.

One by one, the lights in the walkway punched to life. An intense hum rumbled behind the level three walls as its bulbs shone brighter.

Jelly tried to adjust to the commotion by pacing around.

Tor approached her from behind with extreme caution, "Jelly, come on,"

She spun around and howled in his face, "No."

"But, but—"

KERR-RUNCH!

Jelly's forearms shot out in front of her body. Tufts of fur coughed into the air as the skin underneath bulged. The bones within cracked forward and thickened.

"Mee-oowwww…" She struggled in front of an astonished Tor and rolled onto her back.

"Jesus, what's—" Tor couldn't finish his sentence.

Jelly's abdomen pulled out and up. Her first layer of skin pushed out in all directions. The pink glow in her stomach boomed beyond the sound of transforming bone and flesh.

Tor took a step back in shock, "This is *insanity*."

The ship's rumbling and Jelly's pain was too much for him to take.

"Roowwaaarrr…" Jelly kicked herself against the wall and ran her infinity claws across the fur on her stomach.

"Jelly, what's happening to you—"

SPLATCH!

A mound of pink phlegm soared from her mouth and slapped to the ground. Her tongue flapped around her teeth as she caught her breath.

She pounced forward on all fours and bolted down the walkway, much to Tor's amazement.

"Come back."

He gave chase, realizing at once that she could well outrun him.

Tripp and Bonnie approached Medix at speed. During the battle she'd failed to notice that half of the left side of his face was missing.

Bonnie gasped, "What the hell happened to you?"

"Oh this?" He pressed his fingertips along the cavity on his head. His cheekbone was missing from his suicide attempt. Rows of teeth and a solitary fluorescent bulb lighting up the visible interior of his skull shone through his metal skull, "Turns out we're not dissimilar, after all. You and I."

"How did you take the news?"

Tripp stopped and pointed at his ghastly facial wound, "Does this answer your questions?"

Bonnie smirked and shook her head, "Yeah. I know the feeling."

"You don't know *jack* about how I feel," Tripp pushed past her and continued down the walkway, "Keep your patronizing to yourself."

"Actually, Tripp, I do know how you feel."

The ship fired to life as Bonnie caught up to him. She held the wall as the corridor rotated a few degrees like a tumbling bottle of

soda.

"What was that?"

Tripp looked at the ceiling just as the lights snapped on.

"We're moving. Manuel must have gotten the thrusters to work."

"Hey, guys. Botanix and its new guests are taken care of," Jaycee arrived at the pair and thumped his fists against the wall, "There's life in the old girl, yet."

"Jaycee?" Tripp asked. "What's the state of Botanix?"

"I'd say it's in a *terrible* state. She's taken a *second* dumb bomb. Only this one was deliberate, unlike Baldron's."

"Yeah, *for now*."

"Well, I'm glad I wasn't in there when the damned thing went off, that's all I'll say."

Tripp made his way to the Medix entrance, "Let's get the hell out of this godforsaken pink piece of crap."

Bonnie clapped her hands together three times, "Amen to that."

Tripp rolled his shoulders. The whirring connectors and bolts in his face shot through his ears, serving as an unwanted reminder of his current state.

"Let's get to Medix. Make sure Wool and Jelly are okay."

"And Tor?" Bonnie asked

Tripp palmed the panel on the wall, forcing the Medix door open, "Hopefully she didn't spend any of her nine lives kicking his ass to kingdom come."

Medix

Space Opera Beta – Level three

Wool ar-Ban stared at her reflection in the window. Way down below, the virus-like array of Shanta scurried across the sand looking for something to kill. She averted her gaze back to the reflection of her face.

Three fresh cat scratches glowed on her cheek.

She'd only recently come-to, temporarily forgetting about her Androgyne nature. The scratch marks served as a stark reminder that she wasn't human. Lifting her earlobe back with her knuckle revealed the Manning/Synapse logo.

Yet another reminder.

She closed her eyes and sobbed. Feeling sorry for herself wasn't an action she was used to. She knew that most every day of her life there must have been a point when she discovered she was an Androgyne Series Three unit. Every day since her inception she would

have accepted it and gone back to sleep.

Or get knocked out by someone, forcing her to shut down.

Each time she'd wake up with the knowledge of her true self erased.

Still, the pervading sense of being abnormal upset her for the umpteenth-thousandth time in her life. The revelation never got easier.

If anything it got a damned sight worse.

"I hate myself," Wool brushed the tears away from her eyes. She focused on her reflection and saw something she despised staring back at her, "I hate you," she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Wool's fists tightened with fury. She scanned the room for something to strike. Her radio was the first victim presenting itself to her, sitting on the desk like an antiquated idiot laughing at her dismay.

"Bastard," Wool scooped it in her hand and threw it at the window. It bounced off the plastic and slammed against the floor, setting off a music track she usually found comfort in; *Cats in the Cradle* by Ugly Kid Joe from the late twentieth century.

The song reminded her of her childhood. Nothing specific, but just a soundtrack of happier times.

The twang of the opening guitar resembled a bunch of meowing cats. She couldn't be bothered to bend over and stop it, and so shifted the device across the floor with her boot.

The song continued to play its first verse as she moved to the window and held out her palm. Her reflection did exactly the same.

"It was all lies," she said to herself, "But they're *my* lies."

All considerations of life and childhood vanished the moment she looked past her teary reflection.

In the distance, a humongous black tree hulked its root and frame out of the sparkling ocean.

SCHTOMP… SCHTOMP… SCHTOMP.

It slammed its limb-like branches to the shore and waded out of the water.

She raised her eyes with anxiety, "My God. What *is* that?"

The room rocked around each time the tree slammed one of its twelve limbs onto the sand. The surrounding Shanta shifted out of its path. The tree's front four branches extended across the sand and out of view of the window. It seemed to be going for Opera Beta's back-end.

CLANG!

Medix shifted around with every stomp it took – a none-too-subtle indication that the tree had made contact with the vessel.

"Gah," Wool stumbled back and grabbed the frame of Jelly's bed.

She kept her gaze trained on the window. The three suns in the sky bubbled and formed together like an amalgamated ball of pink liquid paint. The rings around it spun faster and faster in all directions like a furious gyroscope.

"What the hell is going on?"

Pink Symphony's horizon wobbled around as the intensity of the room's shaking grew, "We're moving?"

Wool clutched the metal rim of the bed for balance.

The radio slid along the floor. If the casters on each bed weren't locked into place they'd have rolled around and knocked into each other like mad bumper cars at a fairground.

"We *are* moving," Wool clutched her chest and caught her breath, "Thank God."

SWISH.

An enraged Jelly ran into the room on all fours and made an instinctive bee line for Wool, "Mommy."

"Jelly," Wool hopped onto the bed and opened out her arms, "Where have you been?"

The floor shuddered around causing Jelly to slip off track, "Miew."

An exhausted Tor ran into the room and attempted to catch his breath, "Where are you… you little—"

The shuddering floor pushed him onto his ass.

"Oooph."

"—Hisss," Jelly clung to the bed frame. Wool caught her under her arms. She set her down on her lap and shot Tor a look of thunder, "What are you doing?"

"She tried to run away from me," Tor complained and caught his breath.

"Look at her," Wool turned to the hassled Jelly, "Her heart is racing a mile-a-minute. What did you do to her?"

Tor climbed to his feet and tried to keep his balance. Unable to look at the girl, he turned to the window, "I didn't do any— Whoa!"

He caught sight of the sand dunes lowering through the window.

"Are we… *moving*?"

"Yes, did the commotion not give it away?" Wool stroked Jelly's fine orange hair in an attempt to calm her down, "Seems the thrusters are working, now."

"We're getting out of here," Tor placed his palms on the plastic window and felt a wave of relief roll down his spine, "Thank God."

"Miew," Jelly wriggled for freedom in Wool's arms. She kicked her legs out and exposed her belly.

"It's okay, honey. We're going back home."

A glowing pink orb buried beneath Jelly's stomach fur caught Wool's attention.

" You're going to be a mommy, yourself."

Tor looked at the three suns form a blinding ball of pink and white. The rings continued to spin.

"What's going on up there? In the sky?"

"I don't know, Wool kept her eyes trained on Jelly's belly. The pink orb slid around and pushed the fur aside. It bubbled up and formed two circular edges which tried to break apart.

"Huh?"

"Miew," Jelly clung to Wool's inner-suit sleeve and kicked her legs out. The orb bubbled out into three, smaller oblong-shapes and nestled side by side.

"Tummy. Hurts."

"Jesus Christ," Tor yelped.

Jelly jumped from Wool's arms and bolted under the bed frame for safety.

Tor pointed at Jelly's ass disappearing under the bed, "Wh-what's she d-doing? And why is the sun growing?"

"How should I know?"

Wool jumped to the ground and crouched to her knees. The bed's shadow rolled over Jelly's body as she cowered on all fours. Her orange-black eyes gave her position away. She didn't want anyone to touch her – not least Tor.

"Hey, honey. It's okay," Wool offered her Jelly a friendly hand in the hope she wouldn't lash out, "It's me. *Mommy*."

Jelly scrunched her nose and forced her whiskers up and down, "They come."

"Who… *come*?"

"They come," Jelly said with a childlike innocence, "War."

"What's she talking about it?" Tor asked. He knew full well that no one had the correct answer, "War?"

"Protect gift," Jelly flexed her infinity claws and scraped them across the ground, "War. *It comes*."

Wool kept her false smile up for fear of angering the cat, "What do we do, honey?"

"Fight."

"We fight?" Tor snapped. "Fight who?"

"Did someone say fight?" Jaycee's voice boomed from the door, "I'm up for a fight. I think I'll start with knocking your block off, *Rabinovich*."

"Hey-hey," Tor took one step back and held his hands out at Jaycee, "Don't you touch me, you dumb mound of metal."

Jaycee clenched his one good hand and threatened to punch the

man, “Where’s Anderson?”

“Under the bed. Look.”

“Right,” Jaycee thumped the bedside desk and used it for balance. His right knee slammed against the ground, putting a dent in the tile.

“Be careful,” Wool said. “You and your heavy frame.”

“Shhh,” Jaycee peered under the bed and waved at Jelly with his severed wrist, “Hey, girl.”

“J-Jaycee…” Jelly squinted and refused to move.

“Yes, it’s me. Why don’t you come out?”

“Scared.”

“We’re all scared.”

He unclasped the side of the desk and pushed his good hand under the bed, “Com here, girl. It’s okay.”

Jelly didn’t want to go anywhere near him. She shook her head and covered her body with her furry, human-like arms, “No. Safe here.”

Jaycee climbed to his feet, “She won’t come out.”

An idea came to him. He opened the compartment on his leg and took out a black smart bomb, “Wait, I got it.”

Wool raised her eyebrows, “You’re not going to blow her up, are you?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

He grabbed the bulk of the grenade in his hand swung it upside down. The metal hook and pin at the top of the device jangled back and forth.

“Here, kitty-kitty-kitty,” he smiled, dangling the pin in front of her, “Look at the shiny-shiny.”

“Miew…” Jelly’s cat-like desires got the better of her. She took a swipe at the jangling metal only for Jaycee to pull it away from under the bed.

“Haha, look at her going for it,” Jaycee pulled the smart bomb back . He knew Jelly couldn’t resist attacking it.

“Be careful, man,” Tor said. “What if she yanks the pin—”

SCHWAPP!

Jelly’s right infinity claw sliced through the air and hooked through the metal loop. Jaycee yanked it back, but was too late.

CLICK!

“Oh dear.”

“Smart bomb armed,” came a tinny voice from the hook, along with three flashing lights, “Warning, smart bomb armed.”

“Christ almighty,” Tor and Wool hopped to the other side of the room in a bid to take cover, “Make it stop.”

“Miew,” Jelly bolted from under the bed and hopped onto the desk. She attacked the rumbling grenade in Jaycee’s palm.

“Ah, get back,” Jaycee thumped the pin back into place. The lights flashed off one by one.

“Smart bomb deactivated,” advised the grenade.

Tor and Wool exhaled in utter relief.

“Jelly… play. Toy,” she held out her paw and demanded he give her the grenade.

“You want *this*?”

“Jelly wanting.”

“No, Anderson. This isn’t a toy,” Jaycee slid the bomb in his thigh compartment and clamped it shut, “This is for the big boys.”

She thumped her chest with pride, “Me. Big cat.”

“No,” Wool moved to the desk, “You, silly cat.”

“You. *Silly*,” Jelly smirked.

Wool looked at Jelly with suspicion, “Honey, you’re not a big cat. You’re very unwell.”

Jelly threw her adopted maternal crew member a vacant stare.

“Wh-what are you looking at?” Wool asked with a side order of dumbstruck awe.

“Beta moves,” Jelly flicked her ears and clutched the side of the desk. She looked over Wool’s shoulder and saw the pink horizon shudder back and forth, “We fly.”

Jaycee, Tor, and Wool looked at the window in surprise.

“I don’t get it,” Jaycee held his breath and saw the ravenous Shanta horde scurrying across the sand from the ocean, “The thrusters aren’t on. How are we moving?”

Tor walked through the holographic E-MRI of Jelly’s body and pressed his palms against the window. His breath fogged up the plastic as he muttered, “I don’t know. It doesn’t make any sense.”

A sprawling root filled the lower half of the window.

“We’re definitely lifting, though—

SCHLAMMMM!

A black branch smacked against the window. Tor jumped out of his shoes with fright, “H-Holy shi—”

SQQQUUEEEAAKKK!

The black substance smeared out into five, thick digits and tensed against the exterior of the ship.

Jaycee reached for his Rez-9 and pointed it at the window.

“That tree thing. It’s taken a hold of us,” he waved the others back to the door, “Get away from the window.”

Wool grabbed Jelly and set her in her arms, “Don’t shoot the window, you’ll get us killed.”

The room shuddered once again. The force of gravity shifted from the floor and up the back wall.

Tor, Jaycee, and Wool staggered onto the surface of the wall in an

attempt to keep upright.

"Mommy?" Jelly tensed her muscles and clung to the woman's inner-suit, "What goes on?"

"I don't know, honey. Just hold on to me."

Tor lost his mind and snapped his fingers, "Manuel?"

No response.

"Damn it," Tor turned to the door. Tripp and Bonnie clung to it as the ship revolved on the spot.

"What's going on?" Tripp screamed from the door frame. He placed his foot on the wall in an attempt to keep up with the gravity subsidence.

Bonnie placed her boot on the door frame and threw her hands in front of her face, "Wool. Is everything locked to the floor?"

"Everything except the utilities," Wool tumbled next to her and slid up the length of the wall. She watched the beds climb away and released Jelly onto the picture of Jamie.

"Friend," Jelly said.

She pawed her way over the picture as the gravitational pull rolled across the ceiling.

The E-MRI holograph continued to revolve in the center of the room.

"Guys, listen up," Tripp barked across the room, "The thrusters aren't on, but we're being moved. We need to get to the control deck __"

CLANG-SCHPLANG-SCHTANG!

Various medicinal items – including scalpels and syringes tipped out from the trays and crashed against the ceiling. Each sheet lifted from its bed and drew into the air like an angry ghost.

"Tripp, I don't know what you have planned," Wool screamed, "But make it quick."

SHUNT… CREAK… GROWLLL!

"What the hell was *that*?" Jaycee applied his weight to the ceiling.

The three suns warbled together like an unholy light bulb of God, "Captain, we could use some guidance here."

Tripp looked around the floor and snapped his fingers, "Manuel?"

Snap-snap. Still no response.

"Something must have happened to him," Tor placed the sole of his left boot on the ceiling and the other on the adjacent wall. The utilities clanged around his boots.

"The comms must be cut. We need to get to control."

"Wool?" Tripp asked.

"Yes?"

Tripp saw Jelly sliding across the ceiling toward the far wall, "Is what you said true? About Jelly?"

Wool pointed at the upside-down E-MRI. Three glowing dots appeared in the abdomen section of the holographic diagram.

“It’s right there. What’s the state of Botanix?”

“Jaycee took care of them,” Tripp said. “Stay here with Jelly and keep the door closed. Bonnie, Jaycee, Tor. Come with me to the control deck.”

“How are we supposed to get there when the ship is spinning like a spit roast?” Bonnie asked.

Tripp pushed himself onto the ceiling of the level three walkway, “Improvise.”

CHAPTER THREE

USARIC Research & Development Institute

Port D'souza

(Ten miles northeast of Cape Claudius)

USARIC Chief Executive Officer Maar Sheck sat at the head of the conference table.

When he first arrived in the bunker it resembled little more than a makeshift nuclear shelter. Only the common survival tools one would expect to see were present – a large refrigerator and a sectioned-off compartment acting as a makeshift bathroom.

Now, many months later, and upon his insistence, a selection of life's more amenable luxuries were installed.

A plush couch lined the wall. An antiquated one-hundred-inch TV screen installed on the long wall. It reminded him of his younger days.

His right-hand man, Kaoz, stood by the open door as the board members shuffled into the room.

"Quickly, please," a hurried Crain McDormand led them inside. He placed his briefcase on the central table and took a seat next to Maar.

"Is this all of them?"

"Only seven of the twelve could make it," Crain snapped the locks up on his briefcase and removed a bunch of papers.

Maar pressed his hands together and made eyes at each board member. They took their seats around the table.

"Are we quorate, though?"

"Yes. Seven makes it over half."

"Right, I'm starting—"

"—But don't you want to go through—"

"—No," Maar stood up and held his hands at the seven members of the board.

"Good people, I'm very sorry you've been rushed here on short notice. I'd like to apologize for the lack of refreshments and change of venue. Sadly, it is necessary in light of recent events."

"Does anyone know you're down here?" asked an elderly female board member, "We're concerned about you."

"That's very touching. And, no, no one knows I'm here. Not even

my family," Maar waved his hand over the table.

A holographic vector of something named Space Opera Charlie zipped to life and rotated on its axis, "And by the way, *no one* can know I am down here."

"Space Opera Charlie?" another board member pointed at the vector. He clutched at the name placard resting on the desk: Samuel Moore.

"Yes, Samuel. We received a communication from commander Tripp Healy on Opera Beta. Captain Daryl Katz and two of his crew had been killed trying to rescue those on Opera Alpha. Healy went on to confirm that they had decoded Saturn Cry with the help of Anderson, the winner of the Star Cat Project. Then, they disappeared."

"We've heard nothing since?" Samuel looked at the others for a reaction, "What's this got to do with Opera Charlie?"

"As major shareholder of USARIC, I seek approval to change the operational remit of Opera Charlie."

The female board member adjusted her lens-less spectacles and rifled through her papers.

"The board approached the select committee to green light the rescue mission. They agreed and confirmed a launch date of August 29th, 2119."

"That's two weeks from now," Samuel said. "Who are the team?"

The female board member read from her paper, "Colin De St Croix, Captain. Joined the American Star Fleet in 2110—"

"Ah. They're not going, anymore," Maar snapped.

"They're not?" Samuel asked. He expected Maar to explain himself but, instead, received a look of disdain.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Samuel asked.

"I want to change Opera Charlie's task and finish remit."

"You what, now?" Samuel pulled at his collar trying to cool himself down, "You can't just change Opera Charlie's without proper consultation—"

"—Yes I damn well *can*, Samuel," Maar spat and thumped the table. "I've been trapped in this godforsaken bunker for two months. I've been told I can expect to be here for months, maybe even *years*. Don't talk to me about consultation, you imbecile. Look at the damned vector."

The Space Opera Charlie image continued to revolve. An exact replica of Beta and Alpha before her, it contained a control deck, fit room, botanical garden, and medician center. The board noticed its reduced size when held up against its predecessors.

"No N-Vigorate chamber?" Samuel asked. "You're not taking any canaries on board?"

"No. No need," Maar said. "Are you getting the picture, now?"

Samuel spread his fingers and enlarged the entirety of the second level on Opera Charlie; USARIC Weapons & Armory.

"The *whole* of level two is Weapons & Armory?" Samuel swallowed hard and leaned back in his chair, "It's not a rescue mission, is it?"

"No."

"It's a *suicide* mission."

"Not quite."

"What is it if not a suicide mission?"

Maar nodded at Crain, who turned to the board and rose out of his chair.

"After Dimitry Vasilov's assassination, and the expulsion of twenty-three diplomats from US soil, we feel we should exercise damage limitation. I want there to be no doubt before we seek approval from the board for the new motion."

Crain played the recorded video message sent by Opera Beta. Tripp's face fizzed to life above the table.

"Commence playback, please."

Tripp appeared to speak to the members of the board. In reality, it was his recorded message to the lens on the N-Gage control panel.

"This is Tripp Healy, assumed captain of Space Opera Beta. We have lost her captain, Daryl Katz…."

The board watched as the lens caught sight of Saturn and her revolving rings through Opera Beta's windshield.

"Shortly before boarding Space Opera Alpha we deciphered enough of Saturn Cry to ascertain that it was, indeed, sending a distress call. Baldron Landaker and Tor Klyce are in incarceration. Dimitri Vasilov, I hope you can hear this. Maar, I hope you're with him. This has been a deliberate sabotage of our mission. I hope USARIC finds the powers it has to rectify the situation."

Tripp shifted the lens. The board, and Maar and Crain, peered into the holographic video. A beautiful pink shaft of gas stretched out from the middle of Enceladus.

"Is that what they found?" Samuel asked.

Crain paused the video and enlarged the image with his fingers. He traced the pink light coming from Enceladus with his fingertip.

"Yes, this is what he was talking about. Resume playback, please."

Tripp's recording played on, "Alpha was destroyed. Most of us made it back, but we seem to have contracted some sort of virus. The same extends to Anderson—"

"Anderson?" Samuel asked.

"The cat," Crain said. "Jelly Anderson. From the UK."

"Ah, right. Yes, of course. The limey cat."

"—Botanix has been compromised," Tripp continued. "I am waiting on Manuel to report back on the severity of the damage. I do not expect it to be positive."

Tripp lifted his head. The light show coming from Enceladus reflected across his pupils. Two pink tears rolled down his cheek, "Oh m-my. Look at it. It's *beautiful*…"

The video paused for a couple of seconds and snapped away, leaving the vector of Charlie rotating above the table. All eyes averted to the image. Most in the room predicted what Maar wanted. It made them nervous.

"So?" Maar finished.

Everyone turned to him, including Crain and Kaoz.

"Let's establish the facts, shall we?" Maar left a pregnant pause and made his way behind each of the seated board members, "Opera Beta found Alpha and destroyed it. It would appear the cat has decoded the distress call. They've all caught some hideous disease. I ask you, members of the board, does it make sense of Opera Charlie to go and rescue them?"

"For the sake of the crew?" Samuel chanced. "Yes, I think—"

"—No," Maar said. "You think *incorrectly*, Samuel. The insurance claims alone will sink us."

"You can't be suggesting we—"

"—Beta is missing and contains the key to Saturn Cry. The crew are running out of oxygen. They'll be dead by the time Charlie reaches them. We can't take the risk of bringing them home. But we can go in there, destroy everything and come back home with the answer."

"You w-want Charlie's remit to go from search and rescue to… search and *destroy*?"

"Indeed I do."

Maar waved his hand over the conference table. The images of three mercenaries appeared above the table – two men and a woman.

"Since news of the compound breach got out, we've seen the value of our stock plummet. We lost nearly half of our subjects."

"This is insanity."

Maar didn't care for the board member's response. He threw Kaoz a signaled wink.

"This is *necessary*," Maar said. "The three crew members before you are the cream of the crop. Highly-trained, merciless killing machines. At the very top of their game. It is these five who will be manning Opera Charlie to get our property back. Namely, Jelly Anderson and the answer to Saturn Cry."

Kaoz cocked his gun and aimed it at the board members. Crain, who was used to more due diligence, closed his eyes and allowed the inevitable to play out, "God help us all."

“All those in favor of Opera Charlie’s remit being change to search and destroy raise your hands.”

No one *dared* move a muscle.

“Okay, let me put this another way,” Maar kicked the table in fury, “Those of you who wish to remain alive. Raise your hands, please.”

Six board members reluctantly put their hands in the air, leaving Samuel to freak out.

“This is *asinine*,” Samuel barked. He couldn’t believe his fellow colleagues would bow down to Maar’s demands, “This is improper. You can’t threaten us like this.”

“I think you’ll find I can,” Maar’s eyes crept behind Samuel’s shoulders. Kaoz marched a few feet away from the door, “All those in favor of Opera Charlie’s change of remit… *keep your hands raised*.”

The board members kept their hands in the air, eager to satisfy Maar and Kaoz.

Samuel refused to relent and screamed at his colleagues, “Are you serious? You’re just going to sit there and cave in while he—”

“—He’s got a gun, Samuel,” the female board member whispered, “Just do it.”

“I am *not* going to be bullied into turning a philanthropic endeavor into a wanton act of barbarism.”

“No?” Maar gave the man a final chance.

“No.”

“How very disappointing. We have six out of seven *ayes* at the moment,” Maar said. “Would the ascension of the value of your shares not compel you to vote the way your conscious tells you?”

“No, it would *not*.”

Maar nodded at Kaoz and returned to the chair at the head of the table, “That’s a pity.”

BLAMMM!

Samuel’s chest opened in a hail of blood and fragments of flesh and bone. He slumped to his knees and clutched at his heart, bringing Kaoz’s smoking gun to sight a few feet behind him.

The board members gasped in terror and kept their arms in the air.

Samuel slumped face-first to the ground, dead.

“Six for six. A unanimous decision,” Maar returned to his chair and folded his arms, “Anyone got a problem with that?”

The board members shook their heads with great enthusiasm.

“Good. You can put your hands down, now.”

Crain looked up from the desk and winced at the executed corpse bleeding across the floor. He felt like throwing up as he distributed the papers along to each person around the desk.

“My colleague, Crain, here, would like you to sign these NDAs,” Maar said to the board, “If anyone discovers my whereabouts, I will know it was one of you who told them. There will be ramifications for violating these non-disclosure agreements.”

The board members could barely keep their hands still as they signed the papers.

“Sign them.”

They jumped in their seats as Kaoz hovered over them, “You want me to start executing them one by one, Maar?”

“Kaoz, bad doggy!” Maar joked. “Be nice to our friends.”

Each board member signed the document without reading a single word. It was either that or risk getting shot.

“It’s unlikely we’ll all see each other again, of course,” Maar nodded at Crain to collect the papers. The old man did as instructed and collected them up from each person.

“Sorry. Can I just take this, please?”

Maar watched as he moved on to the next board member, “My colleague, Kaoz, will escort you back to your cars. If you’re feeling nervous about your association with USARIC, then fair enough. I can’t say I’d be surprised.”

Kaoz rounded the six board members up and pointed at the door, “Move.”

“Yes, okay,” they hastened over to the door, hoping not to get killed.

“See you idiots later,” Maar rubbed his hands together and looked at Crain at the other end of the desk, “Good?”

“Good.”

“I’m going insane cooped up in here, man,” Maar kicked the table.

Crain jumped in his seat with fright, “I know y-you are, Maar.”

“You have no idea.”

“You *do* realize that you’ve just contravened every rule in the Infinity Clause, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And rendered the Bering Treaty practically useless?”

“Yes.”

“If any of this gets out it might star War World Four.”

“It won’t get out.”

“There are six chances making their way to their cars right now,” Crain slammed the signed documents on the desk. The feeling of guilt tugged at his insides.

“Ah, when Charlie returns with the goods and we’re celebrated as heroes, I’m sure their stock going up by three points *at least* will dampen the blow.”

“Who else knows what’s going on? Other than them, and you and me?”

“Just this imbecile,” Maar kicked Samuel’s bloodied body, “I don’t think he’s going to open his mouth, though.”

“I want you to know something, Maar *Sheck*,” Crain backed up to the door, “I knew nothing. Don’t you involve me in this. If anyone asks, I’ll tell them you put me up to it.”

Maar chuckled as he watched Crain exit the room, “Fair enough. Oh, and by the way, can you send some lackey down here to clear this corpse away before it stinks the room up?”

“You’re a madman,” Crain slammed the door behind him.

* * *

Kaoz watched each of the six board members climb into the back of their waiting limousines. He held his mouthpiece in his fingertips and watched the first two cars drive off.

“This is Kaoz. Do you read me?”

“I read you,” Oxade’s voice came through Kaoz’s earpiece, “Have they left yet?”

“Yes, they’re leaving R&D, now.”

“Good. How did it go?”

“All good. We got a unanimous decision to go and blast Opera Beta into the next multiverse…”

USARIC Headquarters

Cape Claudius, South Texas, USA

“Yes! That’s *amaziant,*” Oxade punched the air as he made his way into the animal compound. He clutched the grip on his rifle and held out his glove to the panel on the wall.

“Signatures all down?”

“You know it,” Kaoz’s voice beamed into his head.

“How did he get them to agree?”

The door to the animal compound slid open. The illuminated control hub loomed in the middle of the room, “I guess you could say it was his persuasive personality.”

“Ha. He’s got bundles of persuasion, that guy.”

“Look, don’t play around,” Kaoz continued. “Maar wants the team assembled within the hour. Some new recruit is joining you. You’re leaving one week ahead of schedule.”

“Good. Let’s get this show on the road,” Oxade reached the central control deck. He made eyes at a tall woman in a lab coat. She pressed her forearm against a plate glass surface turned to Oxade. A bizarre-looking telescopic monocle took place of her right eye. It somehow complemented her bright purple lipstick.

“Nutrene, where are the subjects?”

“Just loading the capture data into the bank. They’ll be here any moment now,” she looked up at the panel and observed the green light loading across the screen.

“How much damage did the protesters cause?”

“They nearly got everything. If it hadn’t have been for the intervention, they’d know everything.”

Oxade glanced at the technicians at their computers. They turned away and continued working, hoping to avoid contact.

“Yeah, that’s right, you lackeys. Keep crunching those numbers.”

SCREECH! WAIL! GRUNT!

A dozen chimpanzees slammed against their cages in the right-hand corner of the compound. Oxade did his best to block out the noise, “Those damn monkeys, man. I swear to God, I dunno why those activists didn’t just shoot them all.”

“Why don’t you put a bullet in the back of their heads?”

The chimpanzees hopped around, snarling and wailing at Oxade as he made his way past their cages.

“Hold on, good buddy,” Oxade turned to them and clanged the butt of his shot-gun along the cage bars, further antagonizing the animals, “Hey! You vicious turd bags. Shut the hell up.”

Kaoz’s chuckles flew through the earpiece, having heard his colleague’s malicious taunting.

Oxade arrived at the second of three doors, “Byford?”

“Don’t call me by my surname. You’re not the boss of me.”

“Not true. I’m your new captain, sweetheart.”

“Really? We’re *on*?”

“Yup. Now, let’s get these little critters returned to their cages.”

Nutrene’s monocle twisted at the console as she hit the green button. The wall by the computers slid into the ground, startling the staff at their workstations.

“Right, good people. Keep back. Let the vehicles in, please.”

The wall opened out into the delivery area of the parking lot. Two forklift trucks rolled in on their conveyors. Each carried a metal cage rammed to the brim with captured felines.

Oxade approached the second bay and pulled the door across its sliders, “Offload them here.”

The trucks stopped by the main console and lowered their forks to

the ground.

SCHWUMP.

"No playing around," Nutrene lifted her left forearm and extended her index finger on her right. The tip of her digit lit up, "Head count, please."

The driver of the first truck hopped out and kicked the cage off the metal grid, "Thirteen in this one, and I think twenty or so distributed in the others."

"Be careful with them," Nutrene counted the cats. She scored the numbers off on her forearm with her fingertip, "So, that's eight… nine… *ten*—" she arrived at the tenth cat. An angry-looking, white Japanese bobtail. They caught each other's gaze.

Oxade moved next to Nutrene and nudged her on the shoulder, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, it's just…" Nutrene couldn't tear her eye away from the ball of white fluff, "That's Suzie Q-Two. One of the finalists in the Star Cat Project."

"So?"

"I didn't realize USARIC was keeping her here. She should have been returned to her owner after it was all over."

"Who cares? Let's get the ugly balls of fluff back in their cages."

Nutrene looked at the driver with suspicion, "Did you make physical contact with any of these felines?"

"No," the driver nodded at Oxade, "When he caught 'em, we just bundled them up."

A dozen lab coated USARIC officials pulled the cages from the first truck and moved them to the second bay.

"Damn it," Nutrene scanned the cages on the second forklift, "I'm only seeing a couple dozen here. Where are the rest?"

"We couldn't find them," Oxade said. "We had ten units out scouring Port D'Souza. This is all we could find—"

"—All you could find? There's at least thirty unaccounted for."

Nutrene's monocle focused on the cats in the second set of cages. Her Heads Up Display scanned each of their faces. The bottom-left corner of her lens displayed the total – *48*.

"So, forty-eight there, and twenty-two in the first set," she recorded the number on her forearm with her lit-up digit, "That's exactly thirty missing subjects."

"They're out in the wild," Oxade said. "They'll never survive on their own. If they don't starve, the freeway will take care of them."

"Are you out of your mind?" Nutrene caught the tardy pace of the workers removing the cages to the second compound, "Hey, get moving. I want them bundled up and stored. *Faster*."

She returned to the console and pressed her forearm to the glass

panel, “These aren’t your ordinary, everyday subjects. We need those missing thirty accounted for, dead or alive. Preferably *dead*.”

“Why, what’s wrong with them?”

Nutrene closed her eyes and ignored the question outright. The panel absorbed the ink from her forearm and fed it onto the screen, “We’re leaving in a week’s time.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“We need to find the escapees and bring them back.”

“Why? What’s wrong with them?”

Port D’Souza

South Texas

Somewhere near Interstate 35

An elderly man named Glenn Logan enjoyed a bottle of *Rollneck Kojak* beer on the porch of his bungalow. He’d been drinking for a few hours by now. The effects of the alcohol kicked in a while ago.

The full moon hung in the air along with the stench of hops from his umpteenth bottle of beer.

There weren’t many cars at this time of night. The occasional lorry passed by. On the rare occasion an Individimedia GPS failed to work, he’d have lost drivers knock on his door asking for directions to Houston. Or the nearest gas station.

Tonight, something caught his eye in the middle of the road.

“Huh? Wassat?” he tried to focus on the thing fifty feet from his porch, “Is th-that roadkill or somethin’?”

He staggered to his feet and tipped the remainder of the bottle into his mouth. Nary a drop produced, he threw the glass in the direction of the *thing* lying in the middle of the road.

“Gaw, nuthin’ but damn roadkill,” he burped and wiped the end of his sleeve across his wet lips.

The thing shifted around and slapped its *tail* to the ground.

Little did Glenn know that the animal in the road was an Egyptian Mau. The moon bounced off its pupils and projected a sliver of green light at Glenn.

The Mau whined and continued to slap her tail against the tarmac.

“Hey, you,” Glen shouted at her and took hold of the porch railing for balance, “Get off the highway. Y’all gonna get yersel’

killed."

"Muuhhh…" Mau murmured as a white light enveloped her face. A pair of headlamps from an approaching car folded over the bump in the road.

"What the hell?" Glenn blinked a few times at the oncoming car, "Oh *Jeez*, no. Hey, you. *Pussycat*, get off the road."

"Grrr…." Mau returned to the surrounding trees and licked her paw.

The headlamps belonged to a purple SUV which sped along the freeway. The driver blared his horn, trying to coax the cat off the road.

Glenn looked left and then right. The Egyptian Mau was ten seconds away from getting mauled by the tires of the SUV.

"Hey, *cat*. Move it."

Mau pressed her front paws to the tarmac and lifted her behind into the air, determined to take the SUV head-on, "Meeoooowww…"

BEEEEEEEP!

The driver slammed on the brakes, throwing the car to a screaming stop inches away from the Mau's nose.

"What the heck is goin' on around here?"

The lone driver kicked his door open and planted his feet on the ground. He looked over the roof his car and spotted Glenn watching the scene from his porch.

"Hey, mister. Is this your cat?"

"Nu-huh", Glenn shook his head in a fit of inebriation, "She ain't mine."

The driver turned to Mau and tried to shift her away with his boot, "Go on, get outta the way, you dirty little *varmint*—"

A cacophony of violent "meows" whirled around the driver's head. They appeared to be coming from the trees.

"Huh?"

One by one, a variety of felines trundled out from behind the trees and made their way onto the road.

Mau extended her claws and scraped them along the road, gearing up to attack.

"Grrrr…"

"What in the hell is going on here?" The driver stood still on the road as the cats swarmed toward him like an angry and fluffy virus, "No, no. Y'all stay away from me, ya hear?"

"Screeeeeeech," The Mau launched into the air with her paws out. She buried her claws through his shirt and clung as hard as she could, kicking and gnashing away at his face.

"Ahh, gerrof me!"

The cats meowed as they swarmed the still-running car. Two

white American bobtails bolted into the driver's side. The remainder hopped through the window and swarmed around the interior of the car.

Glenn squeezed his eyes shut in disbelief. He looked at the half-full bottle of beer in his hand, "Jeez, I drink too much."

The driver did his best to fight off the Mau but it was no use. His behind slammed against the car as she ravaged his face, "Roowwaaarrrr!"

VROOM! VROOM!

One of the white Bobtails pressed her front paws on the gas pedal, forcing the car to shunt forward.

"Meow," Mau climbed onto the driver's seat, leaving its previous occupant screaming on the road.

She ran the side of her head along the stick shift, signaling three of her tribe to push it into first gear.

The car jolted forward once again.

"My car. They're taking my damn car," the driver pushed himself to his knees, "Someone call the cops."

An intense whirlwind of squealing and meowing came from inside the car as it rolled forward.

Mau wrapped her claws around the sticky steering wheel. She meowed at the two white bobtails to apply the gas. Two silver Siamese cats joined them and threw their weight onto the pedal.

The car bolted along the road as Mau held the steering wheel in still, "Meeeooow…"

The car picked up speed and threatened to veer off the path. Fur spat into the air as the wind rolled through the opened passenger window.

Trying to stave off the effects of drunkenness, Glenn stepped down his porch and made his way over to the driver, "Jeez, did you see that?"

"Of course I saw them," the driver picked himself off his knees and cupped his bleeding eyes, "Call the police. They've taken my car."

Glenn threw his left arm into the air and pulled his sleeve back. He spoke into his Individimedia ink, "Hello? P-Police?"

The ink swirled around to reveal *STPD – South Texas Police Department*.

"Thank you for contacting the STPD," a friendly voice came from the pinpricks in his wrist, "Your call is important to us. Please wait while we find you an agent."

The purple SUV's rear lights shot off the road and into the fields in the distance.

The driver brushed himself down and pushed Glenn by the shoulder, "Why didn't you stop them?"

“Why didn’t *you* s-stop them—?”

“—This is the STPD. How may I direct your call?”

“Ah, I, uh—” Glenn swallowed and waded around on the spot, “P-Police?”

“Yes, caller. This is the STPD connecting on your Individimedia channel.”

SCH-PRRAANNGG!

The SUV crashed against a giant tree. A cloud of smoke billowed out from under the battered hood. The left indicator blinked on and off as the cats made their escape.

“Caller?”

Glenn couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

He double-took and looked at his forearm, “Uh. You’ll never guess what’s j-just h-happened. A bunch of cats has c-comm—” he spluttered and tried to keep from laughing, “*Commandeered* a… c-car.”

“Very funny, caller,” the voice sounded extremely put-out, “Please stop wasting our time. Good evening.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Pink Symphony

The tree that wasn't a tree had grown in size since its re-emergence from the ocean. Standing one thousand feet in height, it sprouted a second stump and root and now resembled a nightmarish hell of pure *black*.

Its two stumps stormed through the water, carrying Space Opera Beta at the end of one of its twelfth branches. It twisted the spacecraft upright in its 'palm'.

Hundreds of thousands of Shanta scurried around the sandy shore hundreds of feet below.

A large number of them crawled over the tree's bark-like stumps. Most of them tumbled back down to the ground. Despite having twelve limbs themselves, they weren't able to climb very far up the root.

The tree hulked its way through the water and headed for the dunes. It arched its mid-section and squealed as the blinding light from the converged three suns blossomed in the pink-black sky.

The rumbling from the celestial event taking place thousands of miles above Pink Symphony forced the grains of sand to shimmy around. If something fantastic had already happened then perhaps the crew had been misinformed, or gotten the wrong end of the stick.

The real *fantastic* event had yet to occur…

The Control Deck

Space Opera Beta – Level One

Tripp led the charge along the revolving walkway. The door to the deck lay on its side in the distance as he, Bonnie, Jaycee, and Tor raced along the wall. The bizarre geography resembled a tumbling carnival ride that threatened to return to normal any moment.

"Guys, make sure you keep your center of gravity," Tripp hopped over three wall pipes like a racehorse.

"What the hell is happening around here?" Bonnie asked.

"I don't know. Hopefully Manuel can give us some answers," Tripp reached the panel on the wall and slammed his palm onto it.

The door slid across and allowed them inside.

They were used to seeing the communication console on the left-hand wall. Due to the imbalance of gravity it was technically on the ground.

Tripp walked over it, careful not to damage the panel, “Tor, get Manuel online.”

“Yes, okay,” Tor snapped his fingers and tested the environment, “Manuel?”

“Be careful with your weight, Jaycee. Don’t tread on anything important,” Bonnie tiptoed over the screen and ran to the windshield at the far end of the room.

“It’s not easy, you know,” Jaycee clomped his way past Tor and looked up at the flight deck – which was now on the wall, “What in the *hell*?”

“A-W-A-K-E,” Tor lifted the keyboard and sat next to the panel, “Four, five, seven.”

The console whirred to life and attempted to boot up.

“Success,” Tor clapped his hands and turned to Tripp at the windshield, “We’ve got—”

Tor’s eyes grew with disbelief at the view from outside.

“Jesus *Christ.*”

“I know. Look,” Tripp pointed at the view of Pink Symphony.

The horizon staggered up, down, left and right, due to the tree’s transportation of the vessel. They could see the edge of the universe due to the height they had.

Pink Symphony wasn’t a globe as previously thought. It was a *disc* – the quasi-planetary equivalent of a dinner plate. Where the horizon would naturally curve, instead, it simply *ended*.

Thousands of tiny white dots scrambled hundreds of feet below them. The Shanta.

The enlarged sun provided a brilliant light source for the view. Worse, it seemed to be growing by the second.

“Is this heaven?” Jaycee attempted to take in the spectacular view, “How are we moving?”

CREEAAAKK-WOOOOSH

The ‘floor’ tilted up and around, forcing the communication console to climb up the wall to its regular position.

Tripp, Bonnie, Tor, and Jaycee barrel-rolled down from the wall and hit the ground. They were finally upright once again.

“I think that black tree is carrying us,” Tripp turned to Tor for an answer, “Where’s Manuel?”

“Waiting for him to boot up,” Tor tried to ignore an unusual shifting noise coming from the ceiling, “What do you mean *carrying us*?”

Tripp pointed at the edge of the universe through the windshield, “Look out there, we’ve—”

CREAK-THWUCK!

A giant Shanta carcass slammed to the ground. Its pink, gloopy remains splattered in all directions.

“Gaahhh,” Tripp kicked himself back, scared it would attack him.

“No, no. Wait,” Tripp held the others back and approached the gory miasma of flesh and limbs with trepidation, “It’s dead.”

Everyone turned to face the flight deck. A cylindrical metal disc rolled from under the desk and fell onto its side.

“The Decapidisc?” Tor said in fright, “It’s been used.”

Jaycee thumped his fists together, “Yeah, I think that one was for your friend.”

Tripp looked around for something, “Speaking of Baldron, where is he?”

THWUMP!

Baldron’s decapitated android corpse crashed against the ground behind the crew.

Everyone jumped back in fright.

“Damn,” Jaycee stepped back onto Baldron’s severed head, “That’s one *dead* Russkie.”

His boot accidentally kicked the severed head toward Tor. The jumbled fusion of synthetic skin and protruding neck wires sparked and fizzed as the football of a head rolled toward Tor’s knees.

Tripp stomped his feet to the floor, “Okay, everyone. Just keep calm. They’re dead. We know about them. We know what happened.”

The console produced a succession of beeps.

Manuel’s holograph appeared in the middle of the room, swinging his pages around like a flailing Octopus.

“Duh-duh-duh… ¿Dónde estoy?”

“Huh?” Tor pressed the return key on the keyboard, “Say that again?”

“Estoy confundido. ¿Qué me pasó?”

“Eh?” Bonnie asked, “Is that *Spanish*?”

“He must have taken a serious knock, or something,” Tor punched in a command on the keyboard, “Wait. Let me try something.”

Manuel flapped his pages like an angry pigeon, “¿Compréndeme? ¿Holaaa?”

“Nah, this is no use,” Tor hit a button the keyboard, “Let me try something else.”

“¡Oh, por Dios! Es *ridículo*…”

As Manuel spoke, his sentence shifted from Spanish to English.

“…You changed my language, you *morons,*” Manuel slowed his speech down and realized the crew understood the latter half of his

complaint perfectly well, “Umm, did you hear that last part?”

Everyone nodded, taking great exception to what he’d said.

“Yeah,” Tripp said. “We did.”

“I apologize.”

“You can make amends by telling us what’s going out there.”

Manuel’s shivering covers caused some consternation in the crew, “My scan suggests we are still on Pink Symphony.”

Jaycee grabbed Baldron’s ankles and dragged him over to the door, “Yeah. We figured that out on our own. What’s going on out there?”

Manuel shook himself and floated over to the windshield. He took in the impressive view of the edge of the universe.

“Oh my. Would you look at that?”

“What?” Bonnie rocked up behind him and watched the sun with him, “What’s wrong?”

“The entity that’s carrying us. It’s moving us for a reason.”

“It’s pulled us away from the Shanta creatures. Where is it taking us?”

Manuel bent his spine and ducked, “Its off the charts. That ball of fire in the sky is going to destroy everything. It’s headed straight for us.”

“So we’re all dead, then?” Tripp asked without a trace of emotion.

“Oh n-no,” Manuel freaked out and whizzed over to the comms panel, “Everyone grab hold of something. Now!”

BZZZOOOOWWW!

The power in the control deck snapped off.

“Guuuuh,” Manuel vanished into thin air.

“You heard him,” Tripp clutched the solid surface of the flight deck, “Grab hold of something and get ready.”

Tor dropped the keyboard and grabbed hold of the door, “Ughhh, I don’t wanna die.”

“Shut up,” Bonnie and Jaycee blurted at the man in unison.

The interior of the ship rumbled up a storm. Jaycee and Bonnie held onto each other and hit the deck.

“Gahhhh!”

Baldron’s body and the dead Shanta slid across the floor and slammed against the wall.

The ground lifted into the air and pushed the crew towards the ceiling.

Tripp closed his eyes and screamed at the top of his lungs, “Hold on, everyone!”

SCHWAAMM!

The rumbling noise grew louder and louder. Anything that wasn’t bolted to the floor sprang from the floor and crashed against the

ceiling.

Everyone's legs lifted away from the floor.

The windshield staggered around and threatened to break free from its housing.

Pink Symphony's horizon sparked and elongated, appearing to zoom closer and closer against the roaring ball of white sun against the stars…

* * *

"What was that noise?" Wool lifted her thumb away from the wall. A thin blue line recorded Jelly's height; three feet and three inches.

Jelly stepped away from the wall and looked at the window, "It's coming," she whined and flicked her ears with concern.

"I can see that," Wool slid her detached nail onto the end of her thumb and joined her, "Stay there, honey. By your bed."

"Mommy, I'm scared."

Wool saw the edge of Pink Symphony rock up and down through Medix's window, "I know. We're all scared,"

SCHTOMP-SCHTOMP…

The ground thundered beneath Wool's feet. She spun around and shouted at Jelly, "Honey, grab hold of the bed."

"Miew," Jelly did as instructed and coiled her tail around the metal head rest, "Mommy, I d-don't want to die."

Wool moved to the door and rolled her left sleeve up fer forearm. She ran her thumb along her Individimedia ink and roared into her wrist, "Tripp? Anyone? Does anybody read me—"

KER-WUMP!

Another blast across the ground sent Wool to her knees. She rolled across the floor and grabbed Jelly's bed with her right hand, keeping her left forearm against her face.

"I don't know where you are, but we could use some help up here."

The lack of response caused Wool and Jelly to tremble with fear as they clutched onto the bed for dear life.

Wool's legs launched into the air as the ground thumped harder and harder.

Just then, a blast of pure white light flooded the entirety of the room.

"My G-God…" Wool's pupils dilated as she witnessed the horizon blast towards the window, "We're g-going to…"

Jelly took a final look at the picture of Jamie on the wall. She

gripped the side of her bed to prevent herself from flying off, “I want to go home.”

She buried her head in her pillow and squealed. The ferocious shaking became unmanageable. The bed’s casters rocked from side to side.

“If anyone can hear me, we’re trapped inside Medix,” Wool yelled into her wrist as her feet darted to the ceiling. Her entire body fell upwards, pulling her right hand away from the bed frame.

A low-pitched hum shot around the room. Angelic in nature, and with an underlying sense of anger.

“Honey. Hold tight—”

Jelly threw her arm under the bedside rail and squeezed her eyes shut.

Wool’s voice ground slowed to a crashing halt, “Don’t… let… *go*…”

Her last utterance echoed around the room.

The white light bleached through the window and turned the room into a miasma of heavenly wonder.

CHAPTER FIVE

Forty-Five Minutes Later…

Jelly felt her nose twitch but couldn't see anything. Her eyes were shut.

The eerie silence didn't help matters.

A horizontal sliver of light crept against her eyeballs as she came to. The Medix interior appeared on its side with the beds stuck to the wall.

A blurred vision of a woman peered into the horizontal line with her hands outstretched. Her voice was muffled, "Are you okay, honey?"

Her thumbs pressed Jelly's ears back, enabling a clarity in her voice, "You look like you've hurt yourself, honey."

Jelly shook her head and tried to throw away the disorientation.

It took a few tries.

The beds on the wall crept back to the ground. Such was Jelly's discombobulation; she'd been lying sideways. The confusion slowly melted away and gave rise to the fact that she'd been knocked unconscious.

"Where am I?" Jelly muttered.

FLUMP.

Jaycee dropped Baldron's carcass onto a bed behind Jelly. The noise made her jump to her feet in fright.

"Right, let's see if we can't make some use of this ex-talking junkyard," Jaycee twisted Baldron's left hand away from his wrist. It screwed around and came free.

Jelly hopped onto her bed and licked her lips, "What's he doing?"

Jaycee looked up and brushed away the protruding wires from his own forearm.

"Spare parts, pet."

"What?"

"Yeah. Anybody need any?" Jaycee placed the removed hand's wrist at the large screw joint at the end of his forearm. It spun around and locked into place, "Bingo."

He admired his new appendage and squeezed the mechanical fingers in and out.

Wool looked away in disgust, "No, thank you. That wouldn't be any use to me."

"Are you *sure*, Wool?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

He lifted Baldron's severed head away from the neck and pointed at the cheek-bone, "I can fillet some skin to cover your scratch if you like?"

"I said no," Wool strained her vocal chords in protest, "Now, just drop it."

"What's all this shouting?" Manuel fluttered into the room, followed by Tripp, "Is there something seriously amiss?"

Jaycee waved at Tripp with his new hand, "Hey, Healy."

"Hey."

"Like my new toy?"

Tripp approached the bed and analyzed the new hand. It seemed slightly smaller than normal, "Ha. Is that Baldron's?"

"Yeah."

"Bit small, isn't it?"

"Pfft, better than no hand at all," Jaycee pointed at Baldron's face, "We can fix you up with a new cheekbone. Won't take me a few minutes to solder it on?"

Tripp felt his facial cavity and closed his eyes. Since waking up from the event, he'd forgotten – much like Jaycee, and the others – that he wasn't human.

"It never gets easier."

Tripp ran his fingertips through the hole at the side of his face. The tops of the bottom row of his teeth pressed into the fleshy part of his fingers, "But I might take you up on the offer."

"Just let me know when."

Bonnie and Tor walked in and spotted Jelly and Wool by the first bed.

"Thank God, you're okay," Bonnie looked from Jelly to Jaycee and clocked Baldron's corpse on the bed, "Spare parts? A regular junkyard sale, isn't it?"

"You know it," Jaycee smirked and pushed the body onto its side by the shoulder, "We can get you that new battery you need."

"Ugh. Maybe, maybe not," Bonnie stroked Jelly's hair and sniggered at Baldron's frozen face of fear, "Thank God I don't need a new brain."

Everyone sniggered to themselves.

"What?" Bonnie protested.

"Nothing," Tripp snapped his fingers and waved Manuel over, "Okay, listen up. Manuel has some information on what's just happened."

The holographic book opened up and landed three-quarters of the way through its tome, "The giant tree *thing* that we thought was going to kill us turned out to have bought us some time. It was trying to save us, by all accounts."

“Save us?” Jaycee snorted, “From what? A tumble-drier death?”

“It threw us to the other side of Pink Symphony. Away from the Shanta. Bought us some time.”

“We could have been killed, Crash landing like that.”

“Well, it was either that or be outnumbered,” Manuel said. He projected an image of three suns floating together, “Pink Symphony has a heavenly body headed toward it. As you can see here, the three suns converged. It’s going to wipe everything out in an instant.”

The three suns melded together to form a solitary ball of white light.

“By my calculations, I figure we have around twelve Earth hours until it strikes.”

Jelly hopped off the bed and made for the hologram, “I want it.”

“No, Jelly,” Manuel swung his pages around and whipped the projection up against the ceiling, “It’s not a toy.”

“Miew,” she whined, knowing it was too far away to catch.

Tripp turned to Manuel, “You said something a while ago about one month here equals a period of time back on Earth?”

“That’s correct. One hour here equals one month on Earth.”

“How long have we been here?”

“A little over twenty hours.”

Bonnie ducked her head, “Ugh. Two years?”

“Almost, yes.”

Tripp folded his arms, “So, you’re saying we have to wait for twelve *more* hours until we’re scorched to death?”

“That’s if the Shanta doesn’t get to us first,” Manuel continued. The hologram of the sun changed to a live feed of the Shanta creeping from the ocean to the dunes.

“If Pink Symphony had a north, south, east and west, which it doesn’t… but if it did, then the ocean is due west. The dunes lie dead in the middle. The tree threw us to the east side. It tried to save us from certain death. It was successful, in that respect.”

“Shame about the apocalypse,” Tripp quipped.

“Yeah, that’s not the best news I’ve ever heard,” Manuel said.

The image zoomed out into a map of four quadrants against a perfect circle. The far east curvature lit up, indicating their position.

“Pink Symphony is, for all intents and purposes, a *disc*. It has a diameter of one hundred and eighteen miles exactly. The Shanta move quickly. They could be here in less than twelve hours. Before the sun strikes.”

“So if the sun doesn’t kill us, the Shanta will?” Bonnie thumped the wall and let out a long, exasperated wail, “Ugghh, for God’s sake, why? Why are we here?”

Manuel lowered himself to everyone’s head height and pulled the

projection back between his pages. He turned to Jelly to see her crossed legged by the wall, playing with her claws.

She looked up, “What?”

“Whatever Pink Symphony did to her, we need to make sure she’s protected,” Manuel said.

“Protected?” Jaycee booted Baldron’s head off the bed. It hit the floor and rolled nose-over-skull to a halt in the middle of the room, “Protected from what? Certain death? Are you out of your crazy, Spanish mind?”

“Don’t start that again,” Tor ducked his head and whimpered to himself.

Manuel tried to calm the giant down and relax everyone’s nerves. An unlikely endeavor given the circumstances, “You’ve heard of the two Fs when it comes to conflict, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, fight or flight,” Jaycee twisted his new hand around and wiggled the thumb.

“Did you know that there is a third F?”

“No.”

“Well, there is,” Manuel spun around to the others, “It’s the worst F of all.”

Bonnie shrugged her shoulders, “French?”

Manuel spun around with despair, “Uh, no? How can you *French* your way in a situation?”

“Come here and I’ll show you, you useless tome-stone.”

“I’ll ignore that,” Manuel shrugged off the offense, “No, the third F stands for *Freeze*.”

Tripp scrunched his face, “I’m sorry, Manuel. Maybe I hit my head a little *too* hard when we crash-landed her, but… what the hell has this got to do with anything?”

“Ugh, you androids,” Manuel spat. “You’re so particular, aren’t you? What it means, *captain*, is that you can freeze on the spot in the face of adversity. If you do that, you’ll get killed.”

“You’re a bad liar, you know that?” Tripp spat.

Manuel slammed his covers together, “Oh, I’m *not* lying, I can assure you. If you were to run, well, you can’t run. Unless you want to fall off the edge of the universe. Are you getting my point, yet?”

“No.”

“We’ve established that you can neither fly nor freeze. Both will get you killed. So, which *F* does that leave?” Manuel asked.

“Fight,” Jaycee said.

“Exactly. Your only available course of action. Are you all ready for war? Or do you want to fall on your knees and beg for mercy?” Manuel shifted to the window and aligned his pages to the sandy ground, “Because I can assure you, those Shanta things out there

haven't shown very much of *that* so far."

Jaycee clamped the buckles on his exo-suit together, "He's right, you know."

Tripp kept his eyes fixed on Manuel, "So we fight?"

"Damn right we fight," Manuel realized something peculiar about what he'd just said, "Hmm, that rhymes. I must remember that."

"Miew," Jelly snuggled up to Wool. The pink glow from inside her belly sluiced around her infinity claws.

Tripp approached the bed and made eye contact with Wool. She seemed upset and very protective of the half-cat child resting against her bosom.

"We need to protect whatever is inside Jelly."

Bonnie kicked herself away from the wall. Tor stood up straight and brushed himself down. Jaycee collected Baldron's head from the floor and dislocated the jawbone.

The three of them stood together in solidarity.

"What do you want us to do, Tripp?" Bonnie asked.

"Taking no chances, and certainly no prisoners. We're all war ready," he pointed to Jelly, "But our little war *mage*, here, is not. We have about twelve hours to make sure she is."

Jaycee and Bonnie fist-bumped each other.

"Leave it with us," Jaycee 'fist-bumped' Tor's face a bit harder than necessary.

"Oww."

"We'll toughen her up."

"Good," Tripp looked at Baldron's body before making his way out of Medix, "Bring what's left of the dead Russian with you. I think I'll—"

"—Which one?" Jaycee joked as he looked from Baldron to Tor.

"Hey," Tor protested.

Tripp tapped his destroyed cheek bone, "I'll take you up on that face transplant offer. I can't walk around looking like a comic book villain for much longer. It'll scare our guests."

"You got it."

Jaycee thwacked Tor on the back and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, "Come with me, nitwit. We'll make use out of you, yet."

"Gerrof me."

He booted Tor out of Medix and turned to Jelly, "See you in a while, Anderson."

"Meow," she giggled and dug her claws into Wool's sleeve.

Bonnie held her hand out at Jelly, "Wanna kick some ass, sweetie?"

"Meow."

Kick or lick – it was all the same to this gnarly *half-cat*…

3’5”

The Fit Room

Bonnie moved through the dozen speed cycles and treadmills and headed for a crash mat at the end of the room.

“We’ll make a killer out of you, yet. Follow me.”

Jelly sprinted after her, fascinated by the way her new jeans rode up her thighs, “What are these called?”

“I told you already, they’re called jeans,” Bonnie turned around and looked at her, “They belong to my son. It’s the closest fit we had.”

“Why did you take your son’s jeans into space?”

“It reminds me of him. I like to hold them every now and again. Please look after them,” Bonnie dug her heel onto a red spot at the edge of the dark blue mat. The ceiling slid apart and dropped a rugged punching bag which swung back and forth over the mat.

Bonnie grabbed it and gave it a hug, “You like this?”

“Miew,” Jelly sniffed the scent on her new denim and looked up at the bundle of horsehair hanging in front of her. She clapped eyes on the USARIC logo plastered over its surface and revealed her fangs, “Let’s *kill* it.”

“You know Jitsaku, huh?”

“They made me do it at the Star Cat Trials,” Jelly socked the punch bag with her fist, “They made me kill Bisoubisou.”

Jelly recoiled in pain which made Bonnie chuckle with affection, “Aww. Not quite ready to punch, huh?”

“Miew.”

Bonnie rolled up her sleeve up her forearm and thumbed her Individimedia ink. It swashed around her synthetic skin and formed a giant play button at her wrist.

“I find it helps to train with music,” Bonnie spoke into her arm, “Start play-list. *Fight Music.*”

Nazareth’s *Hair of the Dog* played through the pinpricks in her wrist, “There, that’s more like it. Now we’ll see who’s the sonofabitch.”

“Son… of… a… *bitch,*” Jelly mouthed, banking the phrase in her mind.

“Okay, in Jitsaku terminology, this known as *taking out the trash*,” Bonnie rolled her shoulders and held up her fists.

“Taking out the trash,” Jelly repeated, somewhat confused.

Bonnie trained her eyes on the bag and prepared to deliver a vicious blow, “Okay, girl. Watch me very carefully…”

Over in Medix, Tripp, Tor, and Jaycee observed a bloodied, severed talon from the dead Shanta laying on a bed.

Manuel threw his beam across its shiny surface and projected the results onto a three-dimensional image via the E-MRI scan.

He floated over to the crew, “Just finalizing the data to check for things I consider to be *abnormal*.”

Jaycee turned to Tor and smirked, “He doesn’t mean *you*.”

“What?” Tor asked, failing to get the joke.

Tripp found the remark hilarious. He covered his mouth in a futile attempt to stop himself laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” Tor asked.

“I’m not, I’m sorry,” Tor cleared his throat, but simply couldn’t stop from laughing, “I don’t—Shut up,” He nudged Jaycee on the shoulder. The big fellow turned away and tried to suppress his laughter.

So, too, did Manuel, “Ahem, I’m sorry.”

“Even the damn computer is laughing at me,” Tor complained, “Right, that’s enough, I’m going to Pure Genius to get ready. Where I’m *welcome*.”

Jaycee shouted after him through his sudden fit of laughter, “Hey, remember. Put your Decapidisc on. I’ll be coming up to check soon.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Tor slammed the door shut behind him.

Manuel and the two men burst out laughing, “Oh, *my*. That was funny.”

“I can’t breathe,” Tripp gasped through his chuckles.

Manuel cleared his throat and straightened his covers, “Okay. Can we concentrate, now, on the task at hand?”

“Yes, yes. Of course,” Tripp swallowed his churlish giggles and pointed at the Shanta talon on the holograph, “Benign bacteria?”

“Probably a coincidence,” Manuel said. “A Dodecahydrate, of sorts. Shares a lot of properties with chrome.”

“Chrome?” Tripp struggled to comprehend the data.

Manuel pointed his back cover at the results, “Yes. Some of the elements closely resemble potassium sulfate. As far as comparable elements go, that’s where it ends. It’s absolutely unique, otherwise.”

Jaycee thumped the sword-like talon’s surface and failed to produce so much as a dent in it.

“Impenetrable, too,” Manuel pointed out the obvious.

Tripp pointed to the second image on the E-MRI. A cluster of colored digital blobs, “What about the pink stuff?”

“The blood?” Manuel shook his body around, “Don’t even get me started on *that*. The make-up is entirely alien. A thorough Ames test recorded high levels of carcinogens.”

The chart displayed an array of red values and numbers.

"So Pink Symphony is *cancer*?"

"In its current form, it's far worse. Way more aggressive," Manuel said. "The cell counts dial down. It's more like an immune deficiency. Some evolutionary mix-up."

"Great," Jaycee kicked the bed, "And we've *all* got it?"

Manuel protested, "It's not my fault, nor the bed's. Don't shoot the messenger."

"Symphonium," Tripp stood stepped away from the talon. "If it needs a name and we have to report back to USARIC, we're *not* calling it Pink Symphony."

"Why not?" Manuel asked. "That's *its* own interpretation of itself. Besides, it hasn't affected any of you Series Three units. *Yet.*"

Manuel's flippant remark caused Tripp to burst with anger.

"I realize that, you *dolt*. But I refuse to call my illness Pink Symphony, okay?"

Jaycee went to hold him back, "Tripp, don't get mad—"

"—I can't go back home and tell my wife the reason I'm wearing a mask and can never breathe the same air as her again is because I'm infected with something called *Pink Symphony*," Tripp threw Jaycee back and stormed out of the room, "It's called *Symphonium*. Manuel, record that name—"

"—But, Captain, I—"

"—Shut the hell up and do it," Tripp felt behind his ear and exited the room in a huff.

Jaycee looked at the floor in bewilderment, "Pfft, dude. *Have a cow*, much?"

THWACK!

Bonnie jumped in the air and scissor-kicked the punch bag against the ceiling.

"Wow," Jelly marveled at her friend's strength. The bag swung back into Bonnie's arms.

"Okay, Anderson. You ready to tear it up?"

"Meow," she flapped her tail and made her way onto the mat, "*Me* wanna kill it—"

In Pure Genius, Tor circled around Jelly, who sat crossed-legged in the middle of the cube. He slid his fingertips over the surface of his Decapidisc.

"What's that around your neck?" she asked.

"Never mind that. Jaycee put it on me while I train you. I'm the communications officer and you have to do what I say—"

"—Ohh, I know what it is. It cuts your head off."

"Look, I'm in charge, here," Tor fumed. "Now, try that again. It's

not *me wanna kill it*, as you said. Incorrectly. It's *I want to kill it*. Use the correct first person singular pronoun, please."

"*I* … want to kill?"

"Very good," Tor clapped his hands together. Twenty panels on the adjacent wall lit up. All but one displayed a variety of adjectives.

Big – Small – Drunk – Sad – Fast – Mage – Elated – Drown

Jelly licked her lips and pressed her claws against the tile underneath her legs. She began to read them aloud, "Big… Small—"

"—No, no. I don't want you to read them. I want you to tell me which one is the *noun*."

"Noun," Jelly repeated. "Like a *thing* word?"

"That's right, like a thing word. Take a look."

She scanned each of the words and landed on the sixth one. She turned to him and tried her luck, "Mage?"

"Well done, yes."

"That's *me*," Jelly clapped her hand-paws together. The ends of her infinity claws clinked together, reminding Tor of just how screwed he was if he ever got into a fight with her. He cleared his throat and snapped his fingers at the tile.

The word *Mage* expanded, followed by a blank box.

"Can you give me the definitive definition of the word *mage*, please?"

"It is a girl God. Girl good with magic."

"I guess that's accurate enough. Good work."

"Ha ha," Jelly swished her tail in triumph.

"Right, let's try something a little more advanced…"

4'2"

The Fit Room

Four hours later

"This is quite advanced," Bonnie walked around the punch bag and traced her gloved fingers around the canvas, "Jitsaku is all about harnessing your oppressor's anger and using it against them. You think you can do that?"

"I don't care about my oppressor," Jelly swiped at the bag and flung her infinity claws out, "I care about *me*. What does oppressor mean?"

“It means the bad guy, sweetie.”

“Not liking bad guys.”

“You don’t like the bad guys, you mean,” Bonnie said. “Didn’t Tor teach you anything?”

“Tor is a bad guy. He tried to kill us. Not wanting.”

JAB-JAB-SWUNCH!

Jelly smashed the bag with all her might. It flew past Bonnie’s face, lifting the ends of her hair over her neck, “Whoa!”

“Sonofabitch,” Jelly muttered and thwacked the bag once again, this time with her right foot, “Come and get it.”

Bonnie gasped. “Jelly! Where did you hear *that* word?”

“*It*?”

“No! The S-word.”

“Sonofabitch?” Jelly said with a cute nonchalance.

“Don’t repeat it, Jelly!”

“You said it earlier when we started.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Bonnie failed to recollect the incident. She shrugged and allowed her authority to remain intact, “Well, whatever. Just do as I do, not as I say.”

“Huh?”

“No, wait—” Bonnie corrected herself and thought over the phrase, “Do as I say, *and* as I do.”

“Me confused.”

Bonnie exhaled and closed her eyes, “Just don’t say that word again, okay? No swears, please.”

“Jaycee and Tripp say rude words. One time, I heard Jaycee call someone a mother—”

“—Right,” Tor held his Decapidisc in anger, “Let’s get this straight once and for all. Where and *when* to use cuss words.”

A variety of colorful curse words appeared on the panels inside Pure Genius.

“Okay,” Jelly leaned back on her elbows and started up at the bank of tiles. She clapped eyes on an eight-letter word she’d not seen before, “Tor?”

“Yes, Jelly?”

“What does dick… *head* mean?”

The tile containing the offending word flashed as soon as the utterance left her mouth.

“Oh, uh,” he struggled with the literal explanation, “It’s, uh, a stupid person? A bad word.”

“Like a bad guy?” Jelly added with stern curiosity. Tor breathed a

sigh of relief, thankful that he didn't have to explain why boys and girls were different.

"Yes, yes, exactly. Like a bad guy."

A cheeky grin crept along her face. She eyed him with salacious menace and pointed her infinity claw at his face, "Dickhead."

"What?"

"You're a *dickhead*," she said. "A bad guy. And I know what a dick is."

"That's not funny," Tor pointed to a four letter word beginning with "F' on the next tile, "Okay, smart-ass. If you're so clever, do you know what that word means?"

She turned to it and took a deep breath, "I know how to say it but Bonnie and mommy said I shouldn't."

"Good, I'm glad mommy said that."

"Also, she said that's what you can do to yourself if you go anywhere near her again."

Tor punched the wall in anger, "God damn it."

"Umm, you swore, *Tor*," she laughed at his anguish, "I'm going to tell."

"Please don't—"

4'7"

Medix

Two hours later

"—Please don't knock the cups off, honey," Wool watched Jelly press her chin against the surface of the table, "I mean it. Try to resist."

Jelly looked at the five empty cups perched in a row. Her paws twitched, wanting to strike each one.

Wool tested the cat's obedience, "Do *not* touch those cups. Remember what you did during the Star Cat Trials—"

"Miew," the very thought of the needlessly violent competition made her thrash the first cup off the edge and onto the floor.

"I didn't think you'd be able to hold *that* in," Wool said. "But you need to learn to obey orders, honey."

"I wanna knock 'em all off."

"Think of them as fingers," Wool said. "If that was me hanging off the side of the building, I like to think you'd help me back up."

"Mmm, no. My instinct wants me to knock them off. Make them

fall."

"Ignore your instincts, honey. Just *look* at them. Exercise some mercy. It's a valuable tool to master."

"Miew," Jelly's snorts of derision fogged up the side of the plastic cups, "No, no… don't…" she whispered to herself, "Resist…"

"Don't do it, Jelly."

"Uhhh," she growled and clenched her fists, "No, it's no use."

Jelly tore into the four cups.

SCHWIP-SCHWIP-SCHWAAP. Clunk.

The final cup spun around on the floor, providing the perfect denouement to her failure of the task.

"Sorry."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to. Rule number one. I get to do what I want, *when* I want."

"I see Tor's classes are working," Wool spat with sarcasm. She picked the cups from the floor and returned them to the edge of the desk, one by one.

"Mommy. Don't make me do it again."

"You're going to keep doing it until you learn to resist."

"But I *want* to," Jelly huffed and stood up straight. She seemed taller than just a few hours ago. No longer a six-year-old, she resembled a half-cat adolescent of around thirteen years of age.

Wool covered her mouth with shock, "Jelly?"

"Ugh, what is it now?"

"You've… *grown*."

"Yeah, *so*?" she complained like a typical teenager would.

Wool pointed at Jelly's buds pushing through the chest area of her shirt, "And not just in height, either."

"Mommy," Jelly covered her chest with her furry arm, "Are you looking at me?"

"Okay, that's enough. Over to the wall, please. I want to record your height again."

"Don't tell me what to do," Jelly stormed over to the wall, "I'm only going because you give me food. Remember *that, bitch*."

"Jelly," Wool barked in shock, following her to the wall, "Don't ever say that—"

"—Don't ever say I'm a damn Androgyne," Tripp rubbed his face, looking at himself in the mirror, "Every time I wake up, I feel great. And then something reminds me."

The Rest and Recuperation room provided quiet solace during the crew's preparation for impending doom.

"I swear to God, I cannot go on like this."

The cavity in his head had been patched up using Baldron's synthetic skin. He may have looked a million dollars, but deep down inside he felt a million *Lira*.

He decided one, simple action could be undertaken to make him happy, "Don't let me regret this. I never want to feel this way again."

He removed his thumb cuticle and squeezed it in his right hand. The sharp, curved nail heated up and sparked.

"Let's test those pain receptors," Tripp angled his head in the mirror and placed the sharp end of his white-hot thumbnail at the logo on his skin.

The heat scorched through the Manning/Synapse logo, burning through to his connecting neck rod.

"Nggggggg…. G-God…"

The flap of synthetic skin containing the logo peeled away from his neck. He held out his arm and turned the logo to the mirror.

"How do we like me, now?" Tripp winced in the mirror, "Manning/Synapse… *no more*."

He dropped the flap of skin down the drain and hit the rinse panel.

SWISSSHHHH!

It gurgled down the drain, never to be seen again.

"Ignorance is bliss—"

5'1"

USARIC – Weapons & Armory

Two hours later

"—but weapons are more blissful," Jaycee unclipped a semi-automatic rifle from the wall and presented it to Jelly, "I'm not sure you've got the muscle strength to be able to hold this."

She held out her paws, "Let me try. I like guns."

"Be careful. It's loaded," Jaycee pushed it into her chest. She caught it and felt the weight.

"I will."

"The D-REZ semi-auto. Three round burst. You can flip the lever on the side down for single shot, or up for continuous."

"Okay," she fumbled with the gun in an attempt to get used to its weight.

"It's light, easy to use and gets the job done. That's why I like it."

Her infinity claws didn't get in the way as she gripped the gun in

both hands. Jaycee lifted the nozzle away from his chest, “Don’t ever point your gun at the people you’re working with.”

“Sorry.”

Jaycee thumped the cabinet. A slit formed on the wall, producing a plastic handle, “Stand back, girl.”

He yanked a blast sheet out. The USARIC logo stretched out across its surface. He pointed at its circular target and bullseye, “Now, see that little notch at the end of the gun?”

She closed one eye and looked down the sight, “Yeah?”

“Match it up to the red dot in the middle of the circle.”

She did as instructed. Jaycee turned to her and raised his eyebrows. “Jesus, Jelly. You’ve *grown*.”

“Everyone’s been saying that. I’m a big girl, now,” she said. “Can I shoot it?”

“Yes, wait a second. I’ll just take a few steps back—”

THRAA-AA-ATT!

The first bullet hit the red dot. The rest snaked their way up the blast sheet and popped a hole in the middle of the “A’ of USARIC.

“—Whoa, Jelly,” Jaycee picked himself up from the floor and shook his head. “Never, *ever* shoot until I tell you it’s okay.”

“But you said ‘yes’?”

“I know I did, but I didn’t mean to fire.”

Jelly thumped the side lever down and took aim at the blast sheet once again, “Well, you should be more careful next time—”

“—You should be more careful next time,” Bonnie grabbed hold of the punching bag as Jelly waved the pain away from her claw, “You can’t just keep punching over and over again. I don’t care how angry you are.”

Jelly squinted at Bonnie with evil in her eyes, “I was taking out the trash. *Bonnie*.”

“Don’t look at me in that tone of voice, young lady. You’re not getting so big that I can’t kick your furry little behind all over this place, you know.”

“I can do what I like,” Jelly growled and licked her infinity claws. She spat the liquid on her tongue at the USARIC logo on the mat.

“Ugh,” she winced, “Tastes like zinc.”

“Never lick your wounds, sweetie. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Force of habit,” Jelly said. “And, strange things happen when I try to clean myself.”

“What do you mean?” Bonnie asked.

“Mommy said I have to use the bathroom like everyone else.”

“Wool said that? Because you can’t fit in your tray, anymore?”

“It’s too small,” Jelly tapped the side of the bag with her paws, “I

have to stand in that stupid spraying water like humans do to clean myself."

"It's not stupid, sweetie. It's a shower," Bonnie let go of the bag and took a few steps back, "It's how we clean ourselves."

Jelly struck the bag with her claws, bursting the skin. A tuft of horsehair poked out.

"It's disgusting," she said. "It's more hygienic to use your own saliva and rub yourself down."

Bonnie giggled and pointed at Jelly's paws, "Concentrate, sweetie. Remember, keep your left paw up, and wait for them to strike. One-two, duck, and upper-cut. Use your claws."

"One-two," Jelly jabbed her left paw forward, "back, and upper cut," she finished with a swish to the bag's mid-section.

"If you ever find yourself without a weapon, you'll need to take them off-guard."

Jelly sneered at the bag, "Come and get me, bad guy. Step forward—"

5'4"

Medix

Three hours later

Wool ran her detached thumbnail across the wall above Jelly's head. She looked up at her 'mommy's' elbow.

"Okay, step forward, honey," Wool rocked to her heels and took a step back. A white light raced down the wall and hit the floor. It recorded the distance – five feet and four inches.

"In the past twelve hours you've gained two feet," Wool looked at her forearm and spoke into her wrist, "Time check, please."

The three black lines bent around and formed the current time on her skin – *20:00*.

"It's dinner time," Wool looked at Jelly, "You're nearly as tall as I am."

"How tall are you, mommy?"

"Five foot six."

Jelly extended her infinity claws and moved them from her own forehead to Wool's.

"We're nearly the same height."

"That's what I just said." Wool experienced a sense of impending dread she'd never felt before. Standing in front of her was someone

she'd grown to love. Quite literally. Adjusting to Jelly's new height, the unthinkable crept through Wool's mind.

She was smarter, now, but her instincts and attitude remained the same.

Could Jelly be trusted? Who's to say she wouldn't turn on her crew? The ramifications of Jelly's progress – or evolution – were too terrifying to comprehend. None of this was lost on Wool.

"Honey?"

"Yes, mommy?"

"Would you ever hurt me?"

Jelly thought about her answer for a moment. Each second that trundled by perturbed Wool even more. Surely the cat should have said yes in an instant. The delay in answering was too much to bear.

"B-Because, y-you know I'd never—"

"—You're scared, mommy."

Jelly hung her paws by her side and took some offense, "Don't be scared."

"I j-just need to be able to trust you, honey. We all d-do."

"Why are you st-stuttering?" Jelly clenched her fists, thinking the woman was making fun of her.

"I'm n-not."

"Y-Yes, you are," Jelly turned her back on Wool and made for the door, "Feeding time. Are you c-coming?"

"Yes."

Rest & Recuperation

Space Opera Beta – Level Two

Jaycee, Tripp, Bonnie, and Wool sat around the central mess hall table eating their stewed dinner from paper plates.

Cups of fresh water and a large, half-full jug took place in the middle of the table.

Dinah Washington's *What A Diff'rence A Day Makes* provided the perfect background soundtrack for their dining.

"I miss the taste of *real* food," Wool held her hair back as she leaned in to slurp the stew on her spoon, "What is this, anyway?"

"I think it's essentially some sort of beef," Tripp took a bite and chewed it around, "Mmm, not bad actually."

All eyes turned to Jelly at the head of the table, struggling with her spoon. Anyone who hadn't met her would swear she was eighteen-years-old by this point.

"How are you getting on, Jelly? Gotten used to the spoon, yet?"

“My claws are getting in the way,” she complained and dropped the spoon on the floor. “I don’t like cutlery.”

Jaycee chuckled to himself, “Ha. Well, you can always—”

Jelly pressed her chin to the plate and licked at the chunk of jellied chicken pâté.”

“Or you *could* do that, instead.”

Wool lifted the jug and poured herself a cup of water, “Leave her alone, Jaycee. She’s had a rough day.”

“Miew,” Jelly’s ears pricked up at Wool’s cup at the edge of the table. Bonnie watched the girl’s infinity claws expand.

“Jelly, what are you--”

“—Meow.”

SWISH-SWIPE!

She knocked the cup of water off the table. The water splashed across the floor.

“Oh, now look what you’ve done,” Wool huffed and tore a piece of towel from the middle of the table, “You know, you should really clean this up.”

“No, I shouldn’t, mommy. *You* should,” Jelly swung her head left and right, satisfied at having carried out her instinctive objective.

Tor walked into the room and placed his right hand on his hip, “Hey, Jaycee?”

“Huh?” The big man turned to look at him, “What’s up, *comrade*?”

Tor pointed to the hunk of metal around his neck, “I did what you asked. I taught her as much English as I could. It went well. Now can you *please* take this damn device off?”

Jaycee lifted his gloved Baldron-hand and threatened to hit the activate button, “How do you want me to retrieve it?”

“How do you think?” Tor whined.

“Either way suits me. Your head attached or detached, your call.”

The rest of the crew giggled to themselves – all except Wool, who didn’t find the taunting especially funny, “Jaycee. Come on, leave him alone.”

“Attached, *please*,” Tor made his way over to the free chair and reached for a piping hot tray of stew.

“Suit yourself,” Jaycee hit the second button. Tor’s Decapidisc beeped and unbuckled, folding out into a backwards “E” shape.

Tor caught it in his hands and slammed it to the table, “Thank God that’s off me. I never wanna wear that again.”

Jaycee shoveled a spoonful of food into his mouth, “Then don’t be a twit, and you won’t.”

Jelly’s ears flicked out. She looked at Jaycee, “Mommy says you shouldn’t speak with your mouth full.”

“Mmm,” he covered his mouth and spoke through his food, “She’s

right. Sorry."

"That's okay."

A moment of respite fell across the room as everyone ate their dinner. No one spoke for once. Dinah Washington's dulcet tones soothed their ears as they continued to eat.

It was maybe the second time since Opera Beta left Cape Claudius nearly three years ago that they enjoyed each other's company. They'd been through so much together, after all.

Tripp grabbed his cup of water and held it up, "I'd like to propose a toast."

"Toast?" Jelly licked her lips, "Like hot bread? I wanna try toast."

"No, it's not that kind of toast, honey," Wool lifted her cup with the others.

Jelly didn't have a cup to lift – just a saucer of milk next to her plate of jellied chicken.

Tor felt like he couldn't join in given his history.

"That's right, Russian," Jaycee said. "Keep your cup of water on the table."

"I will," Tor threw a clump of stew into his mouth and turned away.

"To Space Opera Beta," Tripp said.

"To Space Opera Beta," everyone chimed.

"And to Daryl Katz and Haloo Ess. Gone, but never, *ever* forgotten."

"To Katz and Ess," Bonnie, Jaycee, Wool, and Tripp said before taking a gulp of water.

They slammed their cups to the surface of the table and continued eating.

"So, Jelly," Tripp chewed on his food, "There's something I've been wanting to ask you this whole time."

"What?" She lowered her head and nibbled at her chicken.

"Now you can speak, and all. I think I ask for everyone here. Hell, everyone who ever owned a cat. When you were a regular cat, what, uh—"

"—What, uh, what?" Jelly lifted her head and mocked him.

Tripp couldn't get the question out of his mouth. He'd always planned to ask the question of his own pets if the situation ever arose. Of course, it never did. He couldn't formulate the question and quit talking.

Wool had a go in his place, "Honey, I think what Tripp wants to ask is… when you were a real cat, what was it… *like*?"

"What kind of stupid-ass question is *that*?" Jelly snapped.

"Well," Tripp interjected with his second futile effort, "What is it

like? Being a cat?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?" Jelly huffed and palmed her plate toward the edge of the table, "Billions of years of evolution in two days and you want to know what being a cat was like?"

The crew were stunned at her outburst.

"Idiots," Jelly continued to lick her chicken.

"Well," Tripp rolled his shoulders and tried to keep his dignity intact, "What do you think about when you're a cat?"

"I dunno," Jelly eyed the others, hoping they wouldn't clock her secret attempt to push the plate over the edge of the table, "Killing smaller things than me. I like to play with them and watch them scream while they die. It makes me feel good."

Jaycee wiped his mouth and took a sip of his water. The answer she'd given crept under his skin.

"Then I bring the bodies home to pay for my food."

"Like a trophy?"

"*Atrophy*? No, my muscles are strong."

"No, *a trophy*. Like a medal. For your owners? To show your appreciation?" Tripp asked.

"Umm, no. The trophy, as you call it, is more like a pat on the head that they've done well."

"Hmm," Tripp poked his food in deep thought, "Did you ever have a mommy and daddy? Siblings?"

"My brothers and sisters can look after themselves. My real *dad* tried to kill us. I hate him. I hope he's dead."

"Oh," Bonnie said. "That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

"Did your dad abandon you and your family in a cardboard box on the road hoping you'd get killed?" Jelly asked.

Bonnie looked at the others, "Um, no?"

"Hmm," Jelly shrugged her shoulders, "My loyalty is to the people who feed me. And Jamie. I miss Jamie. *Friend.*"

Jaycee wiped his mouth and swallowed the last of his food down, "Ah, yeah. The kid. Heard a lot about him."

"He was your friend, huh?" Bonnie grinned with affection.

"Mommy," Jelly pointed her infinity claw at Wool and then at Bonnie, "Friend."

"Aww, honey. You're my friend, too."

Jelly moved her claw to Tripp, "Friend."

"I'm honored, Jelly. Thank you."

"Yes," Jelly moved her claw Jaycee, "Friend."

"Thanks, Jelly. You're not so bad yourself."

"You're welcome."

Jelly pointed her claw like a gun at Tor, "*Dickhead.*"

"What?"

Everyone burst out laughing.

"*Dickhead*," Jelly repeated and pretended to shoot him in the face, "*Pow*."

"Stop saying that," Tor yelled. "I am *not* a dickhead."

"She's spot on, comrade," Jaycee nearly choked with laughter.

Tor buried his head in his hands, lamenting the day he ever set foot on the damned spacecraft. Of all the ridiculous and nasty events that had happened to him, being called a dickhead by a half-cat was the most humiliating.

Jelly scraped her claws along the table as the howls of laughter died down.

"Jamie wasn't *friend*, really. More like *brother*. Actually, he is my brother. I miss him."

"I'm sure he misses you too, honey," Wool threw her a smile of affection.

"Maybe," she yawned as wide as possible. Her fleetingly scary appearance stunned everyone at the table, "I'm tired."

Jaycee leaned over to Tripp and whispered, "I hate it when she does that. She looks so scary. Those teeth and eyes. Brrr."

"I know."

Bonnie set her spoon down on her plate, "What do you miss about being a regular cat, Jelly?"

"Why, am I an irregular cat?"

"You *could* say that," Bonnie giggled. "You're hardly an everyday pet, now, are you?"

Tripp and Jaycee washed down their food with a gulp of water.

"Hmm," Jelly gave the question some thought, "Probably being able to lick my own butt hole—"

SPRAASSHH!

The two men spat out their water upon hearing the answer. Much of it hit the table and Wool's face.

"Ugh, *really*?" She wiped the water from her cheek and flung it to the ground, "That's gross."

"Sorry, Wool," Jaycee cleared his throat, "Say that again, Jelly?"

Jelly ran the side of her arm along the edge of her plate, pushing it even further towards the edge of the table.

"Licking my butt hole. And other parts. I hate taking showers, but I can't reach some areas of my body, anymore."

"That sucks," Jaycee said, "I know if I could do that, you'd be looking at an empty chair right now."

Wool kicked Jaycee's leg under the table, "Jaycee. Don't be disgusting."

"Sorry. It was just a joke. Don't lose your temper."

Tripp stood out of his chair and collected up the dirty paper

plates, “We’d better get some rest. This is truly the calm before the storm.”

“You got that right,” Jaycee cracked his knuckles.

CLICK-CRUCK-SPLATT!

Tripp looked at Jaycee’s gloves, “That’s one hell of a bad knuckle you had there, Nayall.”

“That wasn’t me.”

Everyone turned to Jelly to see her plate was missing. She stared back at them, refusing to accept any liability. Then, everyone lowered their head under the table – and saw the upturned paper plate bleeding its chicken fusion across the floor.

“Miew,” Jelly whined as the heads returned from underneath the table, “It fell.”

“Bad girl,” Wool snapped at her. “You knocked it off *again*.”

FIZZ-SWISH!

A book-shaped holograph appeared above the table with extreme haste, “Guys, can you hear me?”

“Manuel?” Bonnie stood up, “Yes, we’re here.”

Manuel scanned the room and flapped his pages together, “*Where* are you?”

“R and R,” Tripp said. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re coming.”

“Who are?”

“The Shanta things. They’re headed for Botanix at speed.”

“ETA?”

“Thirty minutes, maybe less. If you were planning on getting rest, I’m afraid you’ll just have to wait till we’re all dead.”

Jaycee walked away from the table, “Pfft, *charming*. Okay, girls and boys. This is it.”

“Where are you going?” Tripp ran after him.

“Weapons and Armory, Healy. Where my specialty lies. I might suggest you do the same,” Jaycee turned to the others, “I suggest you *all* do the same.”

He lifted his forearm to his mouth and stepped out of the room, “Tor, this is Jaycee. Do you read me?”

“Yes, I read you.”

“Meet me at Weapons in two minutes. We’re at war,” he said, moving off down the corridor.

Tripp turned to the others. They seemed frightened – Wool, in particular.

“I guess this is it, then?”

“The sun didn’t get us first?”

“Nope,” Tripp backed up to the door, “Wool, take Jelly with you to Medix, please.”

Wool shook her head and screwed her face with anger, “No, Tripp,” she reached into her belt and pulled out her Rez-9.

“No? Are you defying a direct order—”

“—I’m defying *death*, Tripp. Jelly and I won’t waste away like useless mannequins in Medix. We’re fighting with you,” she said. “Am I right, Jelly?”

Gobsmacked, Tripp and Bonnie turned to Jelly for her reaction.

“Yeah, okay,” Jelly said and rose out of her chair, “I’ll help you take out the trash.”

Bonnie smiled at the remark.

Tripp exhaled and caved in. What other course of action was there, anyway? Everyone would go down in a blaze of glory – *together*.

CHAPTER SIX

USARIC – Weapons & Armory

Space Opera Beta – Level Four

Jaycee scanned the weapons in the armory store, “If we’re going to die, then we’re going down fighting.”

He unlatched three K-SPARK shotguns from the wall and slung two of them over his left shoulder. He passed the third to Tor, “Here, take this.”

“Really? You’re letting me have a weapon?” Tor thumped the side lever down and armed it.

“Don’t make me regret this decision.”

Jaycee grabbed the last six dumb bombs from the wall and tipped three of them into Tor’s hand.

“I guess we’ll need some of these. You have three, so make them count.”

Tor’s jaw dropped at the man’s generosity, “Thanks.”

“I’m not finished yet.”

Five Rez-9s and a spare D-REZ semi-automatic stared at Jaycee from the wall. He licked his lips and scooped them up in his arms, “Okay, that’s it. That’s all our inventory.”

He grabbed the D-REZ and pushed it into Tor’s chest, “This is easier for you to aim with. The magazine is full.”

“Okay,” he said, slipping the strap around his head.

SCHWUMP!

Jaycee threw the hatch shut. He kissed his fingertips and pressed them against the surface of the door, praying for good fortune, “Thanks for everything.”

He stepped away and looked over his shoulder,” You ready to go down in a blaze of glory, *comrade*?”

Tor ran after him. The sheer weight of the weapons slowed him down, “I don’t want to die if that’s what you mean.”

Jaycee palmed the panel on the wall and opened the door. He clipped the five Rez-9s to his belt and snorted, “Funny how we never get a say in what happens to us, isn’t it? *Viktor?*”

Botanix

Tripp stood amongst the rotten plants and stared at the flat horizon. The edge of Pink Symphony loomed against a blanket of a thousand white stars.

"This is it," he said under his breath, "This is where it all ends."

Bonnie held her Rez-9 in both hands and saw the oncoming horde of Shanta crawling over the dunes, "I figure they'll reach us in five minutes. I'm going to kill every last one of those bastards before they kill me."

"Amen," Tripp patted her on the back, "How's your new battery holding up?"

She reached over her neck and pressed her fingers between her shoulder blades, "Yeah, it's okay. I'm not freaking out too much."

"Good," Tripp turned to Wool and Jelly, who appeared ready for battle, "You guys okay?"

"We'll do our best," Wool said.

Jelly held her D-REZ in both hands and swished her tail around, ready for war, "I am a fighter."

Tripp walked over to Jelly and squatted in front of her, "I'm proud of you, Anderson."

"If Shanta doesn't kill us, the sun will."

Tripp ran the back of his hand over her face, "That's right. You're very smart, you know."

"I know," she licked her lips and pushed her gun into his chest.

Jaycee stormed into Botanix with a range of weapons strapped to his shoulder, "Tripp, catch."

He flung one of his K-SPARKS at Tripp, who caught it in his arms, "Fully loaded?"

"You know it."

Tripp looked at the D-REZ firearm in Tor's hands as he walked in, "I see you trust the Russkie with a gun, now?"

"Yeah," Jaycee thumped the man on the back a little too hard for comfort, "I think he knows that he's way down the pecking order of what's going to kill us."

Bonnie armed her Rez-9 and rolled her shoulders. She widened her eyes at the horizon, "They're coming. Get ready."

Tripp ran in front of crew and addressed them for perhaps the last time. He pointed to Jelly and made sure everyone was listening.

"This is it. We need to protect Anderson as best we can. Every single one of us needs to return fire if we're to stand a chance of surviving. On *no* account are you to leave Opera Beta."

Jelly nodded and pressed her baby bump with her elbow, "Miew."

“Setting turret, stand by,” Jaycee held his K-SPARK out at arm’s length. The grip on the gun folded out in three directions and shot downward, attaching itself to the floor, “How many of them are there?”

“We’re vastly outnumbered, let’s put it like that,” Tripp said. “When you’re down to your last clip, use it on yourself.”

“Last *clip*?” Bonnie chewed back her anger at that statement, “How many bullets does it take to kill yourself?”

“You might miss,” Tripp said.

Jelly’s eyes reverted to the horizon. Something strange took place, “Look, over there.”

Everyone turned to see what she was talking about.

“Is it… *moving*?” Jaycee asked.

Wool stepped back against the wall and began to hyperventilate, “I can’t do this. I d-don’t want to die,” she said. The sweat forming over her hand caused the Rez-9 to drop from her hand. She caught it before it hit the floor.

The stars crawled across the black sky at a snail’s pace.

Tripp looked at the desecrated plants. The branch ends and leaves lifted toward the horizon. The grains of sand outside the broken wall trailed away and shifted.

Pink Symphony’s surface revolved, enabling a strong pull towards the horizon.

Jaycee felt his arms lift in front of his body, “What’s happening?”

“Ugh, ugh,” Wool’s heels skidded across the ground, “Oh God, I’m falling.”

“You’re not falling!” Tripp scanned Botanix for something to hold on to, “We’re spinning. The whole place is spinning.”

“Miew,” Jelly grabbed hold of a grounded plant tray to stop herself from flying out of the room.

In the distance, the hordes of squealing Shanta scurried even faster in an attempt to fight off the pull.

The disc spun faster… *and faster*.

Bonnie slipped and fell on her behind. The pull of the external force sent her sliding toward the sand, “Help me!”

“Bonnie!” Tripp grabbed hold of a charcoaled plant and aimed his K-SPARK at the horizon, “Grab hold of something—”

SWOOOOSH!

Pink Symphony’s spinning grew exponentially as Bonnie unsuccessfully tried to grab at the ground. Her fingertips jumped off each tile as it whizzed under her front.

Jaycee placed himself behind the turret to prevent himself from flying out with her, “Bonnie, grab the wall!”

She rolled over to her back and bent her knees. The broken wall screamed towards her. She held out her hand and grabbed it, swinging out above the sand.

"God damn it," Bonnie opened fire on the approaching Shanta, "Die you vicious scumbags. Die!"

BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!

The thousand-strong Shanta clambered towards Botanix. A giant creature extended all twelve of its limbs and cartwheeled ahead of them.

"Jeeeeeeeeeesus…" Jaycee thumped the mounted K-SPARK turret. It fired off a round at the enormous rolling beast, "Get some of this, you ugly—"

BLAM-BLAM-SCHPLATT!

The barreling Shanta exploded as the bullets tore through its central section. The pink gore splattered to the sand as its body tumbled back into the crowd of beasts.

"Open fire!" Tripp shouted and blasted at the horde, "Keep holding on."

Bonnie's grip on the wall loosened, "Agh. Tripp, Tripp, my hand… I can't hang on…"

"Don't let go," Tripp fired another round of bullets at the creatures. The bullets whizzed past Bonnie and tore into three Shanta, severing their limbs.

They crashed against the floor and swished into the horizon.

"Nggggg," Bonnie grunted and continued firing at the creatures. Her fingertips traced against the wall and threatened to release.

The relentless spinning of the disc wouldn't cease.

Jelly looked at Bonnie and released her grip on the plant tray.

Tripp screamed over the incessant growling of the sun headed in their direction, "Jelly, what are you doing?"

"Need to save Bonnie."

She launched herself toward the broken wall and held out her paws.

SCHTANG-SCHTANG!

Her infinity claws spread out into a star shape as she rocketed over to the helpless Bonnie.

"Jelly, no," she screamed as Jelly's face darted toward her, "Grab hold of something."

"I'm coming," Jelly turned over as she flew and fired off a fully automatic clip at the Shanta.

BLAM-BLAM-BLAM-SPRATCH-CRATCH!

The bullets chewed through an oncoming creature, busting its mid-section open. The pink goo coughed into the air, twisted toward

the horizon and blasted toward the stars at the edge of Pink Symphony.

Its carcass tumbled across the sand like a dead bowling ball, knocking the nearest set of beasts onto the ground.

“Bonnie, I’m coming,” Jelly squealed and swiped at the woman’s shoulder with her right paw, “Grab my hand.”

THUMP!

Bonnie’s hand slammed into Jelly’s right palm. They squeezed together as Bonnie lost her grip on the wall.

Jelly caught the side of the wall with her left claw – but the propulsive force was too severe. It banged away and sent Jelly and Bonnie tumbling out of Botanix and crashing across the sand.

“Jelly! Bonnie!” Wool cried out after them from behind the plants. She fired a shot at the creatures.

GRROOOWWWWLL!

The sun grew larger and larger, throwing a Godly light into Botanix. It blinded Tripp, Jaycee, Tor, and Wool.

“The sun,” Tor pointed at the sky, “We’re going to die!”

“Kill *everything*,” Tripp shouted over the commotion, “Keep firing!”

Botanix reverberations punched Tripp around and slammed his back against the wall, “Gaaah,” he screamed and fired a round at a dozen Shanta creatures infiltrating the broken wall.

Bonnie slid across the sand on her back through the stampeding Shanta.

SWIPE-STAB-SCHTOMP!

Dozens of Shanta limbs daggered into the floor either side of her as she scraped the sand on her trajectory, “Agghhh, help meeee.”

A few feet behind her, Jelly spread her claws out to prevent herself from the same fate.

Bonnie tumbled forward, unable to fight Pink Symphony’s spin-pull towards the edge of its mass.

“Bonnie,” Jelly whelped.

She hopped onto the back of a trailing Shanta and dug her paws into its flesh. Her claws tore out of the Shanta’s skin as she launched over to Bonnie.

Pink Symphony’s disc tilted diagonally as it spun around. It angled itself like a radar toward the approaching sun.

SHWOOOOOSH!

Bonnie’s waist slammed against another creature, pushing her around on her descent towards the edge of Pink Symphony.

Jelly tumbled around and spun to her feet, “You’re not going *anywhere*.”

The sand kicked up around Bonnie's as she zipped along the sand. The edge of the disc shot towards her feet.

"Oh God…" Bonnie rolled to her side and looked down the length of her body. Any second now, she'd fall off the edge.

SCHWIPP!

Bonnie's ass hit the edge, catapulting her entire body around. She held out her hands and grabbed the edge of the rock-like surface. Her legs slammed against the edge, "Ugghhh," she screamed and made the mistake of looking down – an infinite drop of intergalactic proportions threatened to take her life.

Jelly slid up to the edge and pressed the butt of her paws to the ground. She stared at Bonnie and whined, "I'm not strong enough to pull you up,"

"P-Please, Jelly," Bonnie squealed and tried to hulk her body up to safety, "D-Don't let me fall."

Pink Symphony's spinning slowed down, forcing Bonnie's front to slap against the cliff edge.

A wave of terror blasted across Bonnie's pupils. Frightened beyond belief, she was convinced she'd fall to her death.

Jelly looked down at Bonnie's fingers and licked her lips, "Miew."

She opened her paw and held it a few inches to the side of Bonnie's hand.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Bonnie turned over her shoulder to see the bottomless pit of stars, "P-Please, help me up."

Jelly viewed Bonnie's five fingers as the enemy. She tried to fight against her instincts – to little avail.

Her paw tapped Bonnie's hand, trying to release her fingers, "Miew…"

"What are you doing?" Bonnie screamed. "Don't, *please*…"

"Meow," Jelly swiped Bonnie's index and middle finger, releasing her grip, "I need to."

"Jesus, Jelly. Please, *no*—"

"—Miew," she took another swipe and tried to knock Bonnie's fingers off the edge.

"Nuh-nuh," Bonnie focused on Jelly's claw sliding under her thumb, "Oh, God. Please—"

"—Miew," Jelly licked her lips and lifted her infinity claw, eying Bonnie dead in the eyes the whole time, "I'm s-sorry…"

"You'll k-kill me," Bonnie's voice croaked as she spoke. She knew she was dead, "Do you want me to d-die?"

Jelly looked up at the scorching sun and widened her mouth. The light reflected off her fangs and into Bonnie's face.

She saw her feet dangling across the stars and then back to Jelly.

In a desperate bid to save her own life, she grabbed hold of Jelly's jeans.

No mercy was shown from the cat as Bonnie's fingers slipped helplessly along the denim.

"I d-don't want to d-die…"

Jelly scrunched her face, unable to resist her instinct. She scraped the sand with the side of her paw and pushed Bonnie's two remaining fingers from her jeans.

"Meow."

Bonnie fell away from the edge.

Her face turned to a picture of hell. She clutched the torn fabric in her hands and plummeted from the edge of Pink Symphony and into the infinite blanket of space and time.

"*Sorry*," Jelly licked her face, satisfied that she'd knocked the *things* from the edge.

Bonnie's death yell funneled from her mouth as her body plummeted away, getting smaller and smaller… until she disappeared altogether.

Jelly flicked her ears and watched a tiny, new star form against the black canvas of space like a single drop of spilled, white paint.

Pink Symphony's entire land mass lit up as the sun got closer.

Millions of grains of white sand cascaded to the ground. Jelly turned to face Opera Beta, one hundred feet in the distance.

The Shanta stopped in their tracks and turned to face the girl standing at the edge of Pink Symphony.

"Miew."

"SCREEEEEE!"

They charged at Jelly in unison. Their new distraction would buy her crew members in Opera Beta some time.

Jelly scraped the ends of her infinity claws through the sand and flapped her tail, ready for war, "Let's take out the trash. Come and get some…"

She ran her claws through the sand and prepared to attack, "Die, you ugly scumbags!"

ROOWWAAARRRR!

Two dozen Shanta barreled toward her as she bolted across the sand in their direction.

"Meeee-owwww," Jelly looked above the first two creatures and saw the towering blackened tree stomp its way out of the ocean behind the ship.

BOLT!

Jelly ran into the Shanta. The first one flung its talon out and

stabbed it to the ground. Jelly swiveled around and landed to her front paws, narrowly missing its stabbing motion.

"Screeeee," it wailed as her claws tore through its two front limbs, sending it onto its behind.

SWISH-SWIPE!

Jelly darted through the limbs of the others. In the furor they swung their arms out and hit one another in a desperate bid to stop her from reaching the ship.

She planted her hind legs on the ground and lifted herself off her heels.

A vicious swipe to another Shanta's slit. The claws tore out its lip, forcing it to gargle and choke. She hit the ground and sliced at its standing limbs, sending its vast body crashing to the ground.

"Yuck," Jelly flung the goo from her claws and raced toward the ship.

Jaycee's K-SPARK turret oscillated back and forth, firing at the Shanta. The crew had done a good job of keeping them out of Botanix – but *still* they came.

"There's another," Tripp pointed at the ceiling and shot a crawling creature in its center. The carcass extended its talons and dropped onto a bunch of beasts, below.

SCREEE-SCHLAMM-SCHPLATT!

"Where did they go?" Jaycee asked over the firing bullets.

"I dunno," Tor took aim at a particularly aggressive creature. Standing a clear ten feet tall, it held out all twelve limbs and formed a spider web at the hole in the wall.

It's slit opened up to reveal a disgusting, black tongue.

SCHWIPP-LASH!

"Ugh, that's one ugly beast," Tor aimed his D-REZ at its mid-section, "Eat this."

THRAA-AA-TAT-A-TAT!

Tor emptied his clip at the creature's mouth. The slit exploded in a hail of pink gloop and pinged the limbs away from its center section. The mass of ungodly monster shunted down the sides of the walls and gasped its last.

Jelly ran between its legs and jumped inside Botanix.

"Jelly," Tripp shouted, relieved that she was still alive, "Get in, quick. Against the back wall."

"What do we do now?" Wool asked, taking potshots at the creatures with her Rez-9.

"The sun is coming," Jelly said. "It's going to kill us all."

Jaycee knocked the side of the turret and swung his secondary K-SPARK from his shoulders, "I'm out. Turret is down."

Tripp grew impatient and snapped his fingers, “Keep firing.”

A rectangle of holographic light formed in the middle of Botanix, creating the outline of a book – Manuel.

“Did someone ask for me?”

“What? No,” Tripp emptied his magazine and palmed a fresh one into his Rez-9, “We’re out of ammo. This is my last magazine.”

“In that case, do you mind if I step out of the line of fire and let you perish alone?”

“That would be very helpful, Manuel. Thank you.”

The book flapped over to the door to Botanix as the others kept shooting at the Shanta.

Jelly raced after Manuel, suddenly fascinated by his contours. She jumped in the air and tried to catch him, “Miew.”

“Miss Anderson?” Manuel pressed his pages against the wall by the door, “What are you doing?”

“I want to touch you.”

“In the middle of a gunfight?”

“Yes,” she spread her claws out and swiped at him, “Meow.”

“Uh, Tripp?” Manuel tried to avoid making eye contact with Wool, who looked at him suspiciously.

“Not now, Manuel,” Tripp yelled, “Later.”

“The cosmic event taking place in the sky isn’t technically a sun,” Manuel said. “It does not contain the gaseous properties of what we consider to be a heavenly body.”

Jaycee stomped over to Manuel and raised his eyebrows, “What is it?”

“Some kind of *portal* is my best guess. If we seal off Botanix and get you into the hyper-sleep pods I’d say you all have a twenty percent chance of surviving whatever is about to happen.”

“Twenty?” Tripp took his eyes off the Shanta for a second longer than he should have.

“Screeeee!”

Tripp pointed his gun at the noise whilst looking at Manuel, “I’ll take those odds.”

BLAM-SCHPLAT!

He yanked the trigger and throated the creature with his nozzle, blasting its innards across the dead plants.

“Quick,” Manuel scanned the panel on the wall and opened the door, “Get to the hyper-sleep chamber. Follow me.”

Wool, Jelly, Jaycee, and Tripp took one, final look at the sky. It wasn’t pink, anymore. Instead, a huge gulf of white lamped the entire horizon.

SCHTAAAMMMM!

The black root of the tree stomped down, crushing all the Shanta

in front of Botanix.

GROOWWLLL…

"Oh *dear*," Wool said. "Let's do what Manuel said. Run, run."

Jelly ran through the opened door. Tripp and Wool followed after her, leaving Jaycee to open his thigh compartment and grab five dumb bombs. He pulled each pin from them and clutched them in his hand, "Come get some."

He bent his elbow out from his chest and threw them among the plants.

"Screeeeeee!" The Shanta squealed in unison, thumping their talons to the tiled ground.

"Adios, amigos," Jaycee kicked the door shut, sealing them inside.

"Jaycee, quick. Let's go!" Wool yelled over her shoulder as she raced down the walkway with the others.

"Yeah, just gimme a minute," he turned to the wall panel and lifted his right boot, "Just sealing the bastards in."

He smashed the panel with all his might and disabled the door mechanism. The Shanta slapped their limbs against the window in a wild, screeching frenzy.

Jaycee rubbed his gloved hands together and held up his middle finger to the window, "Time to go sleepy-byes…"

He turned around and stormed up the walkway.

KA-BOOOOM!

The walkway shuddered as the other side of the window splattered with dark, pink gore. The bombs eviscerated everything that turned oxygen into carbon dioxide within the room.

"I know the feeling, my friends," Jaycee finished as he turned the corner, "Rest in *pieces*, Botanix."

The Hyper-Sleep Chamber

Space Opera Beta

Manuel shuffled into the room and bent out his pages, "Hyper-sleep. Engage. Pods one through *five*, please."

The glass on the first five of the nine available pods slid open.

Tripp entered the chamber with the others in hot pursuit.

"Five?" Tripp asked. "There's six of us."

"I only count *five*, Tripp?" Manuel offered. "You, Jaycee, Wool, Tor, and Jelly. I strongly advise you disrobe, now, and enter the pods as quickly as you can."

Tripp looked around the pod and watched Jelly hop into the room, "Jelly, where did Bonnie go?"

She arched her back and stood on her two hind feet. Tripp's eyes grew with wonder. She matched his height.

"She fell off the edge of the universe."

"What?" Wool slipped off her inner-suit top and folded it in her arms, "What do you mean?"

Jelly looked down at her jeans. She'd grown into them so much that they'd torn.

"She turned into a star."

"What are you talking about?" Tripp said.

"She's *dead*."

The crew knew it already, but Jelly's innocent delivery of those last two words sucker punched them in their collective gut.

"I knew it," Jaycee removed his exo-suit. His muscled body glinted in the fluorescent light, catching everyone's attention.

Tor looked away and bit his lip. He flung his inner-suit into the slider on the wall, feeling extremely inferior – both mentally and physically, "I can't do this anymore. Whatever that sun thing is out there, I hope it kills us," he climbed into a pod and exhaled. It felt comfortable inside.

"I hope it kills *you*," Jaycee yelled as he climbed into the pod next to his, "Just know I'm right next to you if you try something crappy."

Tor crossed himself and muttered a silent prayer, "Please, let me sleep while it happens."

Jaycee thumped the side of the man's pod, "Shut up, *princess*. Praying won't get you anywhere."

Tor cleared his throat and swallowed back his pink saliva. He noticed a bleeding scratch on the top of his arm from the melee in Botanix, "Oh God, make it stop," he winced.

Manuel hovered over Tor and Jaycee's pod, "Gentlemen, please. Do try to exercise a little decorum?"

"Put us to sleep, Manuel," Jaycee crossed his arms over his pectoral muscles and closed his eyes.

"My pleasure."

Manuel blasted two beams from his pages, forcing the glass fronts to slide into place.

Dressed in her underwear, Wool helped Jelly remove her ridiculously tight jeans, "Honey, we're about to go to sleep for a while. You can't wear these in the pods."

"I know," she clung to Wool for balance, "I hate wearing clothes. How do you spend all day in them?"

"No time to talk now," Wool chucked the jeans over her shoulder and grabbed Jelly's hand. They walked over to the third pod, "Okay, climb in and pretend you're going to bed."

“Nap time?”

Wool smiled and kept an eye on Tripp, “Yes, nap time.”

“Please, Miss Anderson. Hurry.”

“Okay, *fine*,” Jelly let go of Wool’s hand and climbed into her pod, “I’m going. Happy now?”

“Immeasurably.”

Jelly looked up at Manuel and screwed her face, “I don’t like you, you know.”

“That’s really of no consequence at this precise moment, Miss Anderson. Now, close your eyes.”

Manuel shot a beam over Jelly’s pod. The hatch slid up and bolted shut, pressing a shaft of gas within the tomb. Jelly closed her eyes and passed out.

“Phew. There, she’s done,” Manuel spun around and darted over to Tripp, “So, just you and Wool left—Oh.”

He caught Wool and Tripp hugging each other. A quiet and solemn embrace. A moment of sanity in an otherwise *insane* situation.

Wool’s pink tears wet her cheeks as she spoke, “Hold me.”

“I am,” Tripp breathed her scent in, “I am. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve held someone?”

“Too long,” Wool kept her grip on his shoulders and moved her face in front of his, “Longer for me than for you, I think.”

“I may be married, but that’s no guarantee of physical contact.”

“Not now, Tripp,” Wool looked down and sobbed into his chest. He held her gently in his hands.

“Tripp?” Manuel mouthed, “Hurry up.”

“*Wait*,” Tripp mouthed back and tilted his head down to Wool, “Hey. It’s okay.”

He held her face in his hands and looked in her bleary eyes, “We did everything we could. Right?”

She nodded and wiped her messy nose, “Yeah. Yeah, we did.”

“It’s going to be okay, you know.”

Wool chuckled with disdain. She wasn’t buying a word of that particular lie.

“No. It’s not going to be okay, Tripp. Going to sleep is just going to prolong the misery. That’s all it’s going to do.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled it away from her face, “But that’s what I love about you, Tripp.”

“What?”

“Your optimism,” she pecked him on the cheek and turned to the fourth free pod, “Okay, Manuel. Load me in.”

“Certainly.”

Tripp soaked up Wool’s last words. It’s possible he was far too optimistic. But that was the whole point of being a successful captain,

wasn't it? He thought as much in his mind.

Tripp lay in the pod and closed his eyes.

"Are you ready?" Manuel asked.

"I'm ready. Seal me in and wake me up if we survive."

"And if we don't?"

Tripp inhaled and exhaled with a degree of peace, "Then leave me alone."

The hatch slid up and released the sleeping gas.

Tripp may or may never see his crew again.

They may not survive the event in the sky. Even if they did, they probably wouldn't get back home. If they did they wouldn't be able to go near anyone. They were contaminated with Symphonium.

The odds got bleaker by the nanosecond. The best thing to do was *not* think about it at all.

After all, there was a sliver of a possibility that all this was stupid a stupid dream.

"Yeah, right. A *dream*," Tripp's final thought steamrollered through his mind before he conked out, "Dream on, Opera Beta."

* * *

The sun scorched its way across the stars in the sky. The tree stomped forward and threw its branches out at it in a loving embrace.

GRRUUNNT.

The ball of white fire slammed into its root and stem as the branches closed around it. The two shimmied together and became one.

Next to it, the water from the ocean formed a twisting line in the air and sucked through into the duo like a straw.

One by one, the remaining Shanta creatures exploded as a chorus of light blasted through them.

Space Opera Beta sluiced into the harmonious concoction of light and wonder.

Everything went white – an act of God previously unseen by anyone or anything that ever lived…

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chrome Valley

United Kingdom

"Happy birthday, poppet."

Emily and Tony clapped their hands together and encouraged Jamie to take a deep breath. He blew out all eight candles on his birthday cake.

Emily rubbed his back as Tony slipped out of the front room. She whispered in his ear, "What did you wish for?"

"I can't tell you or it won't come true."

"Hmm," she looked at the frame of the door, along with her son, "Was it something along the lines of *this*?"

Tony stepped out of the way of the huge gift-wrapped birthday present, "Happy birthday, son."

"Oh, wow."

Jamie jumped from the chair and ran over to the flowery wrapping, "Is it what I think it is?"

"It might be," Tony winked.

Jamie pushed his hand through the pink wrapping paper and felt a cold, metal bar, "Oh, wow. *It is*."

Off came the wrapping paper in one fell swoop. Jamie laid eyes on the gift standing proud in the middle of the room, "Oh, *wow*. I thought you said I couldn't have one?"

"No, no. It's okay," Tony moved over to the gift and retrieved two rubber sticks and ear buds, "See it muffles the sound. You put these in your ears. When you strike the pad it plays in your ears."

Jamie took the buds from Tony's hands and slipped them in his ears. He lifted the stick and thwacked it against the pad.

BOMPH.

"Oww," Jamie yanked the plugs out from his ears.

"Bit too loud, huh?" Tony pointed at the slider on the side of the sticks, "Just turn the volume down."

"Oh. Okay."

The impressive drum kit meant the world to Jamie. He'd all but destroyed his a few of years ago in an attempt to 'find out what made it bang', as he described it. He loved to bash things. Why not create a cheerful tune in the process, he thought.

He felt life was complete now that he had a new drum kit. Tony

and Emily were happy for him.

Jolene toddled over to the table and helped herself to some of Jamie's birthday cake. Her hands scooped up some icing. Most of it went over her face rather than in her stomach.

"Jojo," Emily said. "*Please*. Stop doing that."

Jamie giggled to himself as he banged away at the drum.

Da-da-da-dummm…

Jolene, Emily, and Tony couldn't hear what Jamie was playing. He'd heard the piece of music throughout his life. A fan of ancient classical music (as it was known) his mother used to play the likes of Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky to him as a very young boy. She didn't seem to bother doing the same with his younger half-sister, Jolene, though. He put it down to a change of influence now that his biological father had passed away.

Jamie smiled at Tony as he continued to whack the drum skin at full pelt. Like his real father, Tony seemed to be fitting in nicely. His mother seemed much happier.

Something was missing, though – a feline keepsake she bestowed on him shortly before his father died. *She*, the gorgeous ball of orange fluff who should not be named, for fear of reminder of what they had done.

Jamie bashed the drum panels. He felt a tingling sensation crawl up his left forearm.

Boom-boom-boom… he continued playing, using the kit's synthesizer rhythm track to keep him in tune.

Beep-beep-beep. The ink on his forearm became visible as his sleeve rode up to the crook of his elbow.

The ink on his forearm swirled around his skin and formed three flashing dots.

An Individimedia call from someone unknown to him.

He looked up from behind the kit and saw Emily spoon feeding his sister. Tony pinched his thumbnail and removed it from his hand. He placed it on the table and snapped his fingers.

The thumbnail projected a holographic news report above the table. A top-down view of Santiago Sibald looking up at the lens, standing by a purple SUV. Its fender hanging from the front, it had hit a tree and the occupants had fled.

Swarms of STPD officers surrounded the scene.

"Earlier reports from a witness who wishes to remain anonymous recounts that the vehicle had been commandeered by a bunch of *cats*?" Santiago looked at his wrist and shook his head, "No. That can't be right—"

Glenn, the witness, appeared in silhouette on the screen. He

addressed the interviewee in a state of shock, barely able to form a sentence.

"I-It was w-w-weird," Glenn burped. "Cats everywhere, I tell ya. They made the man s-stop the c-car and then jumped inside an' drove off, yonder."

"You're saying *cats* did this?"

"Yah-yup," the silhouetted figure threw his hands into the air, "Sure as I'm standin' here, my f-friend. One of them was real ugly, like, with a long-ass body and stupid pointy ears. That one acted all dead in the middle of the freeway."

Jamie covered his forearm and, much like Tony was wont to do on most occasions, slipped out of the front room without being seen.

Jamie hopped into his bedroom and jumped onto his bed. He analyzed his wrist and wondered whether he should answer the call or not.

His arm kept buzzing, begging for attention. A final look at the bedroom door was all he needed. He planted the sole of his boot on it and pushed it shut.

SCHWUMP.

A poster for USARIC's Star Cat Project Finals featuring Bisoubisou, Jelly, and Suzie Q-Two hung on the back of the door. Jamie took a deep breath and smeared the three inked dots along his forearm.

"Hello?" he whispered.

"Is this Jamie Anderson?" a stern-sounding female's voice radiated from the pinpricks in his arm.

"Yes."

"No, it's no good. I can't see you," she said, "Look, I'll—"

"—My mom and dad won't allow me to visualize. I'll get in trouble."

"That's okay. We know what you look like. Listen, there's nothing to be afraid of, okay? We're the good guys."

"What? What do you mean don't be afraid?"

"Hang on," the voice cut off.

Jamie shook his forearm. The ink sprawled over the skin on his forearm and formed the face of a woman's head. Featureless, it moved just enough to suggest the woman was producing a live feed.

"Do you see me?"

"Yes," Jamie folded his legs and pushed himself against the wall, out of view of the door, "Look, I can't talk to you. I'm not supposed to speak to strangers."

"I know about Jelly, Jamie."

"You know about—" Jamie thought twice about his reaction. On

the cusp of giving the game away, he decided to change tact, “What about Jelly? What do you want?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Anderson. That Individimedia broadcast Handax sent out. He said Bisoubisou never made it on Opera Beta. If she didn’t go, then who did?”

A pang of terror ran down Jamie’s spine. He’d been busted, “I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“—Shut up, kid.”

Jamie swallowed hard and drew the curtains shut, “Okay?”

“Where’s Jelly right now?”

“She’s, uh,” Jamie looked around his bedroom for an excuse. The USARIC poster didn’t help. The scattered pictures of his family and Jelly were too distracting. Jamie thought on his feet and lied, “She’s at the medician’s.”

“Really?”

“Yes, she got, uh, cat flu.”

“Liar.”

“No, I mean it, she’s—” Jamie’s voice croaked as he began to tear up. He knew he was in trouble.

“—Don’t *lie* to me, Jamie. I know those scumbags at USARIC brought you and your mom back and had you hand Jelly over. She’s not been seen since. Go on, deny it.”

Jamie blubbed, “Please leave me alone—”

“—No, shut up. And don’t tell your mom or dad, or anyone, about this call. Do you understand what I’ve just said?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Good,” the dark figure tilted its head on Jamie’s arm and took on a more affable posture, “Listen, Jamie. We’re not the bad guys. I know it’s hard to believe right now. We’re going to help you.”

“Help me?”

“Yes. You want to see Jelly again, don’t you?”

Jamie wiped the tears from his eyes. His left wrist’s Individimedia panel caught most of the liquid.

“Ugh. What’s the squelching noise?”

“Sorry,” Jamie sniffed and returned to his forearm.

“Opera Beta went missing. USARIC are sending up a vessel to go and find them. You remember a guy named Handax, right?”

Images of a carry case containing Jelly flooded into Jamie’s mind. Before long, a man in his twenties with blue hair came to mind.

“Yes, he gave us Jelly.”

“You saw his broadcast, didn’t you? Everyone did.”

“Yes.”

“They set free a bunch of felines at USARIC. Most of them were caught. It’s all over the news.”

"I know, I saw something just now—"

"—That's not important right now. What *is* important is that you tell the truth. Did Jelly go to Saturn in Bisoubisou's place? Yes or no?"

Jamie closed his eyes and wiped his face. The woman was serious and seemed genuine.

"Yes, she did."

"I knew it," her voice filtered through his wrist, "Thanks for confirming, Jamie—"

"—But we swore we wouldn't tell anyone."

"It's okay. We're not *anyone*. That's all we needed to know. Goodbye."

"Hey, wait," Jamie interrupted, demanding an explanation, "Who are you?"

"It's better that you don't know. If anyone asks and you genuinely don't know, then you and your family are safe," she said. "There's going to come a time soon when people will know Jelly went in Bisoubisou's place. And when that time comes, the media and others are going to hound you for answers. If that happens, USARIC could act, and no one wants that for you."

"Okay."

"You and your family *must* tell the media that you didn't know."

"You mean, like, *lie*?"

"Yes, we mean like *lie*."

"We?"

"Damn," the woman cleared her throat and lowered her voice, "Jamie, so you know Opera Charlie is launching in the next few days. To go and look for Opera Beta?"

"No."

"Well you do now. Charlie's mission is to destroy Beta. Kill everything. The crew are all sick."

"What do you mean sick?"

"Ugh, I can't explain. One of our team is undercover on the Charlie mission—" the woman paused, hesitantly, "I can't talk. I have to go."

"But wait—"

"You'll hear from us again. Stay sharp, kid."

The head shape on Jamie's forearm stretched into three separate lines. The connection disabled, leaving Jamie on his bed, alone and concerned.

USARIC Training Compound

Cape Claudius, South Texas, USA

A man in his early twenties approached the weapons bench. An selection of firearms lay on the table – the familiar K-SPARK shotgun and Rez-9 among them. A range of grenades and utilities lined its outer edges.

The man clenched his gloved fists. On the side of his arm he clocked the USARIC logo along with his name – *A. Hughes*.

Beyond the bench lay a makeshift walkway, resembling a movie set. He adjusted his visor and flicked the lever down by his ear.

Bzzzzz.

The headgear whirred to life, "Heads Up Display activated," a friendly female voice advised, "Okay, Alex. You have ninety seconds to breach the perimeter and take out all the hostiles. It's up to you which weapon you choose."

The contours of each firearm lit up as he scanned the table. A medium-sized semi-automatic caught his attention, "I'll go with the D-Rez."

"Ah, nice," she said. "Lightweight, versatile. Are you much of a run-and-gun?"

"Not really. I prefer precision."

"Fifty compact rounds per magazine. Slider indicates three-shot burst, then five, and finally outright automatic."

"I'll go with the three," Alex knuckled the lever right up and inspected the side of the firearm. He grabbed a pair of flash grenades and hooked them around his belt.

"Remember. Don't point your gun and the people you work with. Or any of the civilians."

"I don't intend to."

The woman giggled through his headgear, "That's the spirit. Approach the start position, please."

"Understood."

Alex stepped up to the red line on the floor, ready to breach the first the "building'.

"You look kinda cute in this get-up, by the way," the woman said. "Fancy a drink after the show's over?"

"No, thank you," Alex clutched the grip on the gun and scanned the first room, prepared for battle, "Let's do this."

"Record time is ninety point seven seconds."

"I'll do it in eighty-five."

The room's lights snapped on revealing a variety of desks, chairs, a screen, and a table.

"Here we go. Standby."

CLUNK-CLICK-BZZZZ.

"Go, go, go," her voice threatened. "Tango to the right."

A holographic bad guy jumped up from behind the computer desk

and aimed his rifle at Alex, who slid across the floor and fired three bullets.

POP-POP-SCHPANG!

Two in the chest, and the final one in the head. The bad guy hit the deck, dead.

"You're on your own, now, Hughes."

"Understood."

Alex rolled onto his side and flipped himself to his feet. The room was eerily empty, "Left wall, secure."

"Watch your six, good buddy."

Alex spun around and blasted another bad guy aiming his weapon at him. He slid across the table as the bad guy opened fire on him.

Sections of the wall burst apart behind Alex as he reached the other side of the table and yanked on the trigger.

BLAM-BLAM-SCHPANG!

The bad guy recoiled from the bullet and smashed against the wall.

"Good going, Hughes," the woman said. "Get out of there. Detonator set to five seconds.

"On it," Alex kicked himself to his feet and made for the door.

"Four… three… two…"

Alex launched himself through the door frame and threw his elbows in front of his face.

"One… and that's *boom time*."

He rolled across the floor and kicked the door shut.

KA-BLAAAAAAAM!

The door contained the blast. Its frame shunted around against the impact. The HUD display showed the timer rocketing forward – 15:09.

"Go, go, go," the woman said into his headset, "You got family at home?"

"Just a girlfriend," Alex pushed himself away from the wall and stepped back, spying the length of the corridor, "Walkway secure."

He paced along the barren corridor. Two doors faced each other on each wall at the end.

"Be careful, Alex," she said. "One of those rooms is full of civilians."

"Got it," Alex turned a dial on the side of his visor. The dimmed image of the walkway turned a fussy yellow, pink and green.

"Switching to thermal imaging," Alex said. He held the D-Rez in both hands and moved forward with stealth.

"You think thermal imaging will help if you discover creatures in space?"

"I'll give it a try," Alex pressed his back to the wall.

Oxade and Nutrene watched Alex work from the viewing gantry twenty feet above the set up.

"Who is this guy, anyway?" Nutrene asked, paying particular attention to the young man's trim physique.

Oxade caught her ogling and knocked her elbow, "Are you checking him out?"

"What? No," she protested under her breath. "It's just that—"

"—Just that you want to give him some extracurricular training, right?"

"Don't talk *lessense*, you dummy," Nutrene felt her shoulder and went beet-red.

Oxade smirked and thumped the railing, "USARIC shipped him over from Minneapolis-Two yesterday. Fresh blood from the American Star Fleet."

"Oh, he's *fresh*, for sure."

Alex unclipped a flash bang grenade from his belt and tossed it into the left-hand room.

BOOM!

A shower of white light exploded through the crack in the door. He pushed into the room with his weapon drawn. Ten holographic actors acting as bad guys and civilians staggered around within his HUD.

"Be careful, Alex. Not all of them are tangos."

The white mist evaporated to reveal two bad guys with guns. Alex swung his firearm around and popped both in the head with great expediency.

"Two down," he turned around and was about to shoot a woman in a red dress. She held up her arms and begged for mercy.

"Please don't shoot."

"Get down."

Alex spotted a man grab the woman from behind. His heads up display formed a red line around the bad guy's body, indicating a fresh target.

The man grabbed the woman in his arms and pushed the barrel of his gun against her temple, "Put the gun down."

"Unhand her and put your arms up."

"That's fifty seconds, Alex," the female voice advised, "Be careful."

Alex held his arms out and focused on the wall. A line of traveling dots projected a recoil off the wall and straight into the side of the man's head.

The man threatened to shoot the hostage, "Put your gun down—"

THRAA-TAT-A-TAT-SCHPLATT!

Alex let out a burst of three bullets. One by one, they ricocheted off the wall and punched through the bad guy's chest, neck and forehead, respectively.

The civilian woman ran across the room and went to hug Alex, "Thank you."

"No time for that now, Alex," Oxade chuckled from the viewing gallery, "Keep moving, my friend."

"Hostile down," the female's voice into Alex's headgear, "Hostage deactivated."

The woman vanished completely, leaving Alex to back himself toward the door, "Area secure."

"Go, go, go."

Alex bolted out of the room and approached the adjacent door. He slapped the lever down in the side of his D-Rez and aim it skyward.

"Be careful here, Alex. Don't get trigger happy."

"I don't intend to."

The timer on his HUD read 65:15, "Come on, let's do it."

"I'm not stopping you."

BAMMM!

Alex booted the door open and slid across the floor, aiming his gun at the far wall.

A long metal bridge snaked out to a door fifty feet away. His feet and legs lifted away from the bridge floor.

"Not so tough now, are you big guy?" she laughed into his headgear, "Let's see how your firearm works in zero gravity."

"Holy *shi*—"

The circular room rocked to life and revolved around him. Severely disorienting Alex as he clung to the rails. His feet lifted above his head as he aimed his gun at the far door.

"Look at all the pretty stars, Alex," she attempted to put him off, "Can you defend yourself when push comes to shove?"

"What?"

BOP!

A disgusting alien creature thumped him on the back, knocking him across the spinning tube. The lights from the stars swished around, revealing the creature's six eyes. Two skewers shot out from its body and clawed at Alex as he propelled himself from the metal bridge.

SWISH-SWIPE!

Alex took aim at the beast as he hung upside down in the air, "Damn it."

"Don't shoot it, Alex," Oxade yelled from the gallery. "You don't

want to blow your hand off."

"I wasn't going to—"

SNAAARRRLLL! SNASSSHH!

The creature hooked its two front arms up and around the railings and pulled taught on its back legs, ready, to launch at Alex.

He looked at his belt and unfastened a wire with a hook at the end, "God damn it, "cmon, c'mon…"

Alex threw the hook at the top railing. The prongs at the end fanned out and clamped to the metal, keeping Alex tethered in the air by the wire.

Oxade nudged Nutrene and pointed at the nearby staircase, "Come on, let's go."

"Okay."

GROWL!

The creature revealed its fangs and gripped the metal, throwing itself back on its haunches.

Alex slid a grenade from his belt and flicked the pin away. It spun across the air, headed for the far door, "Come on, you ugly sack of scum—"

WOOSH!

It flew into the air and made for Alex, who bent his knees against his chest and released the D-Rez into the floating void.

SLAMMM!

His boot kicked away its skewers, forcing it to scream in pain. Alex's fist rammed into the beast's mouth and down its throat. He released the bomb and booted the creature along the bridge, pushing himself to the exit in the process.

"Go on, get out of there," the girl said in his ears.

Biddip-biddip-beep-beeeeeep…

Alex darted through the air and overtook the whizzing grenade pin. The panel on the wall grew larger and larger as he twisted himself into a flying position.

He slammed his glove against the panel as the beep from the crazy creature flat lined.

WOOSH! The door opened into a small, black decompression chamber.

Alex took one, final look at the creature and grabbed the door frame, "Bon voyage, you ugly mother—"

KA-BLAAAAMMMM-MM!

The creature detonated in a thousand, messy pieces as Alex slammed the door shut.

His entire body hit the deck as a cloud of gas thrust from the vents in the wall.

"Decompressing now," the female on the other end of his

headgear said. “All good?”

“Yeah, fine,” Alex picked himself up from the floor and held his arms out.

SWISH!

The outer door slid open, releasing Alex into the training compound. His HUD recorded a completion time of 87.7.

“Damn it,” he flipped his visor up and placed his D-Rez firearm on the table, “Two seconds short of my target.”

“But just over two seconds faster than the record, my friend,” Oxade applauded with a distinct over-zealousness as he made his way to the table, “Not bad for your first try. Very well done.”

“I could have been quicker,” Alex removed his helmet to reveal a devastatingly handsome young man with a chiseled jawline and beautiful crystal blue eyes.

Nutrene made the mistake of looking him in the face. She felt her heart flutter, temporarily disabling her ability to speak, “Oh, m-my.”

“Hi, I’m Alex.”

He offered her his hand to shake. She stared at it for a few seconds, trying to decide if something spectacularly embarrassing might occur if she made contact.

Carefully, she took his hand in hers and melted inside, “I’m, uh, Nutrene. Nutrene Byford.”

Alex chuckled and threw her a heart-stopper of a wink. She yanked him forward without warning and ran her hand over his face, much to his surprise.

Her lips pressed against the side of his face, allowing her to whisper something very serious in his ear.

Oxade wasn’t surprised by her actions. Nutrene had a way with her colleagues, not least the men.

“All that time dealing with animals,” he muttered, “And she’s the biggest animal there is.”

“I, uh, don’t know what to say?”

“Then say nothing. Alex Hughes,” she returned the wink and spun around, making damn sure he could see her svelte frame and behind display its perfection.

Oxade sidled up to his new colleague and elbowed him on the arm, “She’s something, ain’t she?”

“She sure is,” Alex blinked.

“She may be a medician. But don’t be fooled, my friend,” Oxade patted him on the back and walked off, “Just as she saves lives, she takes them away. She’s one helluva killing machine.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

A fighter jet opened its landing gears and made its descent toward the air strip.

Oxade, Nutrene, and Alex sat in the back of a white buggy, headed from USARIC's main building.

"So, Minneapolis Two, huh?" Oxade asked over the noise of the engines.

Alex scoured the air field through his shades. The sun burned brightly, adding to the intense heat he felt within his American Star Fleet suit, "That's right, captain."

"How long did you serve?"

"Joined six months ago on the Bering Strait clean-up operation."

"Right," Oxade raised his voice over the noise of the fighter jet touching down on the strip, "Getting rid of the commie bastards from our soil? I hear they're just getting started"

"Something like that," Alex said. "It's going to turn into a real bloodbath, soon."

Nutrene pointed at a spacecraft looming in the distance. Space Opera Charlie. The scaffolding had been removed. The vessel looked ready for action.

"See that?"

"Yes," Alex widened his eyes.

"That's going to be our new home as of next week."

"Opera Charlie?"

"Yup," Nutrene licked her lips and threw him a coquettish smile, "I've heard it gets lonely up in space."

"Aren't there five of us going?"

"That's right, my friend. A reduced service. Skeleton crew, so to speak," Oxade slammed on the back of the driver's seat, "Can't we go any faster? We have a briefing to attend."

"I'm going as fast as I can."

Oxade turned to Alex, "See this idiot? You can't get the staff, these days."

"Why don't you leave him alone?" Alex shouted over the roar of the jet engine, "He's just doing his job."

"If I had my way, all the lackeys would be fitted with Decapidiscs. That'd make them produce a lot faster."

"Decapi—*what*?"

"*Decapidisc*," Oxade yelled. "The compliance unit. Take your head clean off if you mess around."

"Oh."

USARIC Headquarters

Conference Room

Maar Sheck's holographic representation loomed over the conference table.

Crain McDormand was physically present next to him. His thumbnail sat at the edge of the table, throwing Maar's projection into the room.

"Where are they?"

Crain looked at him apologetically, "Hughes has just finished training. They're on their way."

"What's keeping them?"

"Why, do you have another conference to go to?" Crain smirked with sarcasm.

"Very funny, ass-face," he walked through the conference table and snapped his fingers, "Bring up the recording."

Crain waved his hand over the table. A paused three-dimensional image of Maar stepping out of the back of limousine appeared above the surface.

The door to the conference room opened. Oxade, Nutrene, and Alex walked in and surrounded the table.

"Hello, Maar," Oxade took a seat at the end of the table.

"Oxade Weller and Nutrene Byford, as I live and breathe," Maar spat with contempt at their tardiness, "Where the hell have you been?"

It wasn't clear which of the two versions of Maar had spoken – was it the paused image, or the transparent one standing in the middle of the table?

"Umm," Oxade clocked the still image, "What's this? Why are you see-through?"

Maar walked through the wooden surface and arrived at the head of the table. He nodded at Crain, "This happened thirty minutes ago. Play the recording."

Crain obliged and clicked his fingers, enabling the playback to proceed. Maar planted his feet on the ground and stepped out of the limousine. Kaoz ushered him toward the entrance to USARIC HQ, "We have the package," he said into his headset.

"Very good, get him inside, quick."

WHOOSH-WHOOSH!

A rocketing noise shot through the air from behind them, "Maar, get down." Kaoz swung his gun around at the front of the limousine.

Before he could open fire, the driver's head exploded, painting

the inside of the vehicle a dark red.

"Get down, now," Kaoz shielded himself behind the limousine, looking for the source of the attack. He pressed his microphone to his lips, "This is Kaoz. We are under attack."

"Kaoz," Maar rolled across the ground and looked into blinding sun, "H-Help m-me…"

A dark object whizzed around and blocked the rays from his face., "What i-is that?"

An attack drone buzzed around in the air. It spun its cannons at Maar and blasted him in the chest, killing him instantly.

"Maar," Kaoz pointed his firearm at the drone and shot it out of the air. The hunk of metal crashed to the floor right beside Maar's bleeding body.

A thoroughly befuddled Opera Charlie team stared at the paused image of Maar's dead body.

"But… *how*?" Oxade muttered.

"It wasn't me," Maar walked around the table, unable to contain his anger.

Security officials dragged the decoy body into the reception area and tore the fake skin away from the corpse's face. The man underneath looked nothing like Maar, but was very dead.

"A decoy. His family has been well compensated for their loss."

"Wow. You really can't go anywhere, can you?" Nutrene clocked Crain's thumbnail projecting Maar's image in the room, "Where are you broadcasting from?"

"I'm not telling you that, you stupid woman," Maar stopped in front of his new team and folded his arms. "No one can know my whereabouts. It's for your own safety. Crain, vector scope of Opera Charlie, please."

"Yes, Maar," Crain lifted his hand over the surface of the desk. A vector representation of Space Opera Charlie appeared above the table.

Oxade, Nutrene, and Alex leaned in for a better view.

"I'm happy to report that the board unanimously voted to change Opera Charlie's remit. It is now a search and destroy operation. We've selected the most dedicated and, shall we say, less morally-observant members of USARIC to go to Saturn, find Opera Beta and return our property."

"Your property?" Oxade chuckled to himself.

"Yes, that's right. Our property. We know they decoded Saturn Cry. Anderson helped them."

"Anderson?" Alex kept up the pretense, "Who's that?"

"That dumb animal they took with them," Oxade snapped and turned to Maar, "What's the situation with Opera Beta? Last I heard

they went missing?"

"They're still missing. That's why we're sending you up. We know they found Opera Alpha and Zillah's crew. Something seriously awry is going up there, and I've had just about enough of it. And so have the board, to be perfectly honest, hence their change of heart."

Maar nodded at Crain, who enlarged the top third of the vector scope of Opera Charlie.

"We've scaled down the ship to the bare essentials," Crain said. "As there are five of you, you'll only need the bare minimum. All search and destroy operations are equipped with the latest technology."

"Five of us?" Oxade looked at Nutrene and Alex, "I only count three?"

"That's right, *five*," Maar said. "Oxade and Alex, can you stand up, please."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Everyone rose from their chairs and took a step back, confused as to the nature of the instruction.

"So, what do we—"

Oxade's swivel chair spun around. The spider-like metal plate liquefied and formed into one, solid mass.

"What's going on?"

The liquid metal stretched out across the floor. The armrests tilted up and into the air.

Alex's chair performed the same action, only this time, a circular magnetic plate sprung out from its side.

The two melded together and stretched apart like three-day-old chewing gum.

CLUNK-SCHWIPP.

The metallic rope snapped in half, forming two lifelike androids. The fabric from the chair sunk into the metal and pushed out into the shape of a head.

"Wow," Nutrene looked at Oxade for a response. "Is this what I think it is?"

Maar smirked as he moved to the head of the table, "Opera Charlie, meet your fourth and fifth crew members. Poz and Neg Bass."

Poz, the 'male' droid of the duo, stood three-foot-high and looked like an ugly, mini metal beach ball. He tilted his perfectly circular head up at Oxade and blinked his set of peculiar *eyebulbs*.

"Greetings. I am Poz Bass. I will be joining you on Opera Charlie."

"But-but—" Oxade failed to process the marvel of technology standing before him, demanding an introduction, "What *is* this?"

"*This*, as you've seen, is not an inanimate object," Maar said. "Poz

and Neg are prototypes of USARIC's latest venture with Manning/Synapse. Death drones. Ruthless killing machines. Now, don't be rude. Shake Poz's hand."

Oxade turned to the droid, this time focusing on his face. A dreadful synthetic skin glistened in the ceiling light. Oxade heard the whirring of Poz's internal mechanism. A very subtle squelching noise followed with every microscopic movement.

"Yeah, put it here," Oxade slammed his palm into Poz's hand. His skin immediately absorbed into the droid's hand.

"Hey, hey, my fingers," Oxade tried to wrench his hand away.

"Ha-ha-ha," Poz released Oxade's hand and trundled over to his counterpart, "I am sorry. I was attempting humor."

Oxade looked at his hand. It was immaculate, as if nothing had happened.

"I f-felt my soul leaving my b-body," Oxade stammered. "What the hell are these things—"

"—We are death drones," explained the pulchritudinous Neg. Affecting a more feminine touch, she slid her arm around Poz and seemed to weld into the side of his body, "Of course, we'd rather have been named something less *killerish*. We are state of the art killing machines, but that's not *all* we are."

SCHLOOOOO—

Neg's entire frame amalgamated into Poz's body, doubling their height as they twinned into each other. Oxade, Alex, and Nutrene were now looking at a fully-formed killing machine. An exo-suit unraveled down their bodies.

"They look like Jaycee, now. Don't they?" Maar smiled at the trio.

STOMP!

The giant droid in the exo-suit stomped forward and spun its hands around, leaning into Oxade's face, "Human?" it asked in its threatening grunt of a voice.

"Y-Yes."

"I thought so," it held out its palm and closed its fingers, forming a blue-hued fist.

THWOCK!

The hulking mercenary punched Oxade in chest, catapulting him across the conference table. Crain moved out of his path as he landed on his ass and whined.

"Oh, for goodness' sake—" Nutrene jumped behind her chair and focused her monocle on Alex, "I'm not going to Saturn with *them*."

"Get up, Oxade," Maar said. "You're the captain. You're meant to be setting an example."

"Y-You c-can't expect us to go on Opera Charlie with *them*?" He climbed to his feet and brushed himself down. The USARIC logo had

torn away from its stitches due the violent nature of the punch.

Maar stood behind Oxade and addressed the team, “I think the five of you will get the job done just fine.”

SCHLOOOOOOP!

Poz and Neg twisted into each other in a miasma of metal and pulled themselves apart. They trundled to the table like a pair of scary Siamese twins and pointed at the vector scope of Opera Charlie.

“Is this our new home?” they asked in tandem.

“Yes, it is,” Maar said.

“We go to Saturn and kill everything.”

Maar nodded, “Yes, but bring Anderson, the cat, back with you. Safe and sound.”

“What if she doesn’t want to come back?”

Maar made eyes at them, “Listen very carefully to me. Oxade is in charge. He’s the captain. So, you do as he says.”

“Yes,” they said.

“Nutrene is the medician. If something happens to any of you, like you’re injured or seriously hurt, she can fix you. Right?”

“Right.”

“And Alex Hughes is in charge of the weapons on level two. Not that you guys need a gun, of course.”

Poz slammed his elbow into his own ribs. His forearm broke out like an accordion to reveal a triple barreled canon, “We have our own guns.”

“I know you do,” Maar winked at Neg, who pressed her hands together and fluttered her metallic eyebulbs at him, “Your sister, here, is a lethal little minx, too. I’ve no doubt you’ll be able to complete the job.”

“Excuse me, Maar,” Alex said. “There’s something I don’t understand.”

“What is it, Hughes?”

“Well, if Poz and Neg are *death drones*, why do you need us humans to go with them? They don’t need oxygen. Resources wouldn’t deplete as fast?”

Maar sighed and made the mistake of touching Poz on his shiny head. An electric spark frazzled the holographic image momentarily.

“We made a mistake with Opera Beta. They’re all Androgyne Series Three, except for Haloo Ess, the botanist and, of course, Anderson herself. We won’t be making the same mistake again.”

“What’s the mistake?”

“Sending Series Three units on a manned mission. They went missing. They reported seventy-two hours’ worth of oxygen, not that it matters to the majority of the crew. But they have the answer.”

“If I may add, Maar,” Crain interjected. “The whole idea of using

Androgynes on a manned mission to Saturn was to preserve USARIC's bottom line. A minimal financial outlay."

"What does that mean?" Nutrene asked.

"Quite simply, it was the cheapest option. All we need to know now is what happened to them. Quickly, and quietly."

Alex shook his head and took a final look at Pox and Neg, "So you're sending humans up with the new generation?"

"That's right."

"And you want us to kill everything that moves?"

Maar and Crain nodded with a quiet solemnity.

"You leave in four days' time," Maar waved the Opera Charlie vector image away from the table, "It's a three-year round trip. I suggest you put your affairs in order as soon as possible."

Ten Minutes Later…

The men's bathroom.

Alex splashed cold water on his face. He squeezed his eyes shut and looked at his face in the mirror. A fine USARIC logo imprint loomed in the bottom right-hand corner.

"You look like hell," his reflection moved its lips as he spoke. "A year and a half to Saturn and we might not find anything."

Biddip-biddip…

"Damn it."

He rolled up his sleeve and looked at his forearm. The Individimedia ink sluiced around and from three blinking dots. He took one last look at his face and thumbed the ink to his wrist.

"This is Alex."

"It's me," the voice of a woman came through the pricks in his wrist, "Are you alone?"

"I'm in the bathroom."

"How did the briefing go?"

"Yeah, it went fine," Alex turned to the stalls. Two of the five were locked but he knew he was alone, "Listen, I can't talk right now. I'm still with the crew."

"You're definitely *on*, though? Right?"

"Yes, I'm on—"

CLUNK.

The door to the bathroom opened. Oxade walked up to the floating urinal concourse in the middle of the room.

"Hey, good buddy," he said to Alex. "All set?"

"Yeah, *amaziant*, thanks," Alex pressed his right palm over his left wrist. A muffled question from the woman warbled through his

fingers.

"Who you talking to, there?"

"Oh, you know," Alex fake-smirked and made his way over to the hand drier, "Women trouble. She's always calling."

"Ha. Tell me about it," Oxade unzipped his front and proceeded to relieve himself, "Seems you have an admirer. Nutrene's got the hots for you."

"Has she?"

"Don't act like you haven't *not* noticed."

"Hmm," Alex turned to the drier. A bead of sweat formed across his brow and rolled down the side of his face. He spread the pinpricks on his wrist and dipped his left hand into the drier. He couldn't afford Oxade to overhear his call…

Interstate 45

North Texas Border

Grace had the face of an angel. Her long, flowing brunette hair raced down the back of her combat fatigues.

She pushed her finger against her ear and tried to keep herself steady in the passenger seat of the 4x4 as it raced along the uneven ground.

"Siyam, *please*," she said to the driver. "Can you at least *try* to keep us steady?"

"I am, I am," Siyam, the African-American driver, said. He focused on his rear view mirror. "You want us to get pulled over?"

"Sorry, Alex," she returned to the cables streaking out from her wrist, "I didn't hear what you said. Can you say again—"

SWWIIISSSHHHHHHHHH!

A deafening, prolonged thunder rocketed through her ears. The frequency forced her to snap the earpiece from her head and fling it to her lap.

"Jesus Christ!" she screamed. "What's that noise?"

Siyam threw Grace a look of anger as he stepped on the gas, "What's up with him?"

"He said he was in the bathroom, and then this—Ah, my ears feel like they're bleeding," she fumbled for the device and pulled the wire from her wrist.

"Maybe he can't talk?" Siyam said. "If he says he can't talk, then he can't talk."

"No, I need to know he's okay. I need to know the mission is on," she slung the earpiece against her head and spoke into her wrist.

“Alex? This is Grace. Do you read me?”

“Yes—” his voice chimed in to a static rumble, “Everything went well, but I can’t talk right now.”

“Did you pass the training? Please tell me you passed at least.”

“Yes, I did,” Alex snapped and hushed his voice, “Where are you?”

Grace looked over her shoulder and watched the border control center disappear from view, “We’ve just passed border control. About five miles from Corsicana.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, the usual,” Grace said, “Those Nazis at border control practically performed a cavity search on Siyam.”

“That figures. Racist scumbags,” Alex snorted through her earpiece, “Any news on where the subjects are headed?”

Grace grabbed Siyam’s left arm and ran her fingers over the ink.

“Hey, what are you—”

“—Shut up for a minute and keep your eyes on the road. I need to look at something.”

She held his arm up and looked at the white ink break apart into thirty separate dots.

“Ten miles south-southwest,” Grace said.

The screen on the dashboard of the 4x4 showed thirty flashing dots swarming toward a dotted line, “We know from Moses’ absorption effort in the compound that they’re chipped. We have their locations on screen.”

“Okay.”

“I just hope we can find them in time. Alive, ideally.”

“Be careful when you get there. USARIC have reprogrammed them. You don’t know how they’ll react.”

Alex pushed through the USARIC reception area and headed for the entrance. An iron bust of Dimitry Vasilov took center stage in the middle of the area.

He glanced at it as he walked into the bright, clear sunshine. The warmth of the sun rays calmed him down despite the noise coming from the launching jets on the airstrip.

“I can’t believe this is where Denny took the shot.”

“Are you there right now?” Grace asked.

“Yes.”

“I made contact with the kid. Jamie.”

“Oh, really?” Alex seemed surprised, “You found him?”

“Yeah, there must be a million Jamie Andersons on *Viddy Media*. Struck gold on the hundred and twentieth one. You’d have thought those Brits—”

"—Did he confirm Anderson's involvement with Opera Beta?"

"Yes, he did."

"Good," Alex said with relief, "that tallies with what I heard at the briefing. Both ends covered. That's better than substantiated fact, now."

"Anderson took Bisoubisou's place. She's up there with them."

"I *knew* it," Alex punched the air with excitement. A gaggle of USARIC officials on their smoke break looked over at him in bemusement, "Good work, Grace. That's exactly what we thought."

"I know, right? If Beta's report is correct, then Jelly is the one who decoded Saturn Cry. They're in receipt of the answer. We just have to hope they're alive."

Alex turned away from the spluttering officials and caught the magnificent Space Opera Charlie spacecraft standing proud within its scaffolding in the horizon.

"Five more days, Alex," she whispered from his wrist.

"You got that right."

He took in the sheer enormity of the spacecraft standing in the distance, "Five more days…"

CHAPTER NINE

The Control Deck

Space Opera Beta – Level One

Space Opera Beta hung in the vacuum of space surrounded by zillions of tiny, bright stars. A bright and vibrant Enceladus drifted behind it. The last of its pink light blossomed against the universe's canvas and swallowed in on itself.

Nothing left. The universe was serene.

Saturn's surface took up the majority of the view through the windshield by the flight deck, appearing to oversee the vessel like a maternal juggernaut. Her rings no longer revolved.

The communications panel lay dormant, a giant husk of its former self. The emergency strip lights across the ground provided the only indication of life or action aboard the spacecraft.

The communications console rumbled to life. Its light snapped on. The processor fired up as if it was struggling to awaken from a deathly slumber.

WHIRRR-POP.

A shower of orange sparks blew out from the mainframe. Four sides of a rectangle fizzed a few inches away from it. Its outline stormed through the air and produced a full hologram of a book.

Manuel had awoken.

"Oh, my," he fluttered around and wrestled with the pages between his covers.

FRII-II-ITT.

The sheets shuffled together like a deck of playing cards. He slapped his covers together and fanned every page out like an extended accordion.

"Ah, that's better."

He shifted around to the communications panel, "Ooh, we've left Pink Symphony, I'm happy to report."

The holographic tome opened out and cast a beam of green data light at the communications panel.

Each circuit within the mainframe whirred as they fired up.

"This is Manuel. Autopilot of Space Opera Beta. Open communication channels, ports one through one-zero-fifteen."

The screen on the panel snapped to life.

“Assess current location.”

A slew of white text ran up the screen.

“Feeling better, I see.”

BEEP.

The screen displayed its update:

> **USARIC S.O.B. SIT-REP_**
> Date: September 1st, 2122
> Location: Enceladus (orbit)
> Engine & Payload: Operational
> Thrusters (Auto & Manual): Operational
> Communication channels: Open
> Distance to Earth (miles): 750m
> *Communication incoming_*

“I see you’ve survived whatever happened to us. I thought we’d never see each other again,” Manuel shut his beam off and fluttered up against the screen, “Twenty-one-twenty-two? Did we really skip three years? Feels like it was just yesterday. I guess to us it was, actually. Hmm.”

He folded the edge of one of his pages and brushed over the last entry, “Communication incoming? Run banked communications.”

The text bled out into a white flat line. A mountainous waveform sprawled across the screen from the right-hand side.

Static blew from the speakers as the flat line wriggled around. It curved up as Oxade’s voice spoke.

“This is Captain Oxade Weller of the rescue vessel Space Opera Charlie. Do you read me?”

Manuel flipped over two pages and copied the waveform across the blank slate, “Keep playing.”

“I repeat, this is Captain Oxade Weller of USARIC’s Space Opera Charlie *rescue* program. Contacting Opera Beta on a frequency of zero, five, four, niner. Does anyone read me?”

Manuel slapped his pages together with applause.

“Oh, *my*. We’re going to be rescued,” he pressed his pages back and transmitted a beam back to the panel.

“Speech-to-text.”

As Manuel spoke, the panel transcribed his message in white text, “This is *The Manuel*, autopilot of Space Opera Beta. Can confirm connection. Crew are in hyper-sleep. Oxygen conservation in process. Ess-oh-ess. Please confirm bridging instructions. Send.”

The text appeared on the screen and then vanished.

“Thank God. How very thoughtful. Good old USARIC, sending a ship to come and take us home.”

The five occupied hyper-sleep pods buzzed to life. Their transparent plastic panels slid open one by one.

Tripp, Wool, Jaycee, Tor, and Jelly lay asleep with peaceful looks on their faces.

Manuel burst to life by the energy tube and slapped his pages together, “Guys, wake up. I have some *amaziant* news.”

“Huh?” Tripp was the first to wake up. The others shuffled around and groaned, half awake, “Are we dead?”

“No, quite the contrary,” Manuel zoomed over to Tripp and lowered himself to his face, “We’re being rescued.”

“Rescued?”

“Yes, Opera Charlie is hours away. They are here to rescue us.”

Tripp gripped the edge of his pod and jumped to the floor, “That’s great—Whoa,” he yelped and lost his footing. The disorientation hadn’t quite left his body.

“Be careful, Tripp. Take it easy. We don’t want you falling over and hurting yourself before our visitors arrive.”

“No, you’re right. I’ll take it *real* slow for a while,” he said.” Where are we?”

“We are no longer on Pink Symphony. According to the geo-scan we have returned to our solar system, just out of Saturn’s orbit.”

Tripp closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He looked over his shoulder and caught Bonnie, Wool, and Jaycee open their eyes and yawn. He turned back to Manuel on the verge of crying for joy, “Thank God.”

The book took a bow, “It’s on my to-do list if we ever meet him. Or her.”

“Did we make contact with Charlie?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“What’s that meant to mean?”

“They left us a message—”

“—Right, did you send one back—?”

“—I was just going to say… *yes*, I did. They should have received it by now. No response so far, but by the time we return to control I think we can commence bridging procedures.”

Tripp stood to his feet and felt his jaw. Baldron’s replacement cheek had settled in nicely during the hyper-sleep. He felt a million bucks once again.

“Good idea. We’ll get everyone oriented and ready to disembark.”

“Certainly,” Manuel threw a beam at each of the pods and pulled the front hatches down, “The question is, what do we do about Opera Beta? We are forty-eight hours left on oxygen and general supplies.”

Tripp watched Jaycee and Wool start to wake up.

“We may have to abandon Beta, depending on her state. I’m sure between us all we can make it back to Earth.”

“I knew you said *disembark* a few seconds ago,” Manuel muttered and ducked his head, “But if you do that, I’ll be left on my—”

“—Everyone, can I have your attention?” Tripp ignored Manuel and clapped his hands together. Jelly rolled around in her bed. She didn’t want to wake up.

“Ugh, did we get off that godforsaken disc?” Wool muttered.

“Yes, we did. Guys, I have some good news.”

“What?” Jaycee asked.

“We’re going home.”

The crew didn’t believe what they’d just heard.

“Are you serious, right now?” Wool asked.

“Yes, I am. I’m going to the control deck with Manuel to make the arrangements. I suggest you do whatever it is you need to do to prepare.”

“Comms are back on?” Tor asked, somewhat giddy with excitement, “Can we send messages?”

“Yes,” Manuel said. “Comms are fully operational, now.”

Tripp walked to the door in just his underwear. Wool snorted and sighed, “Tripp?”

“Yeah?”

“Put your pants on first?”

“Oh,” he looked down at his bare stomach and legs, “Yes, good idea.”

An anxious Tor stepped out from his pod, “What does this mean for me?”

Tripp approached the slider on the wall, “What do you mean ‘what does this mean for you’?”

“Well, if we’re going home…” Tor thought out loud, arriving at the obvious before the others had a chance to dish it to him, “I, uh, can’t go back home.”

“You damn well can and will, *dickhead*,” Jaycee planted his bare feet on the ground, grabbed the edge of the pod, and pushed himself upright, “USARIC will deal with you properly.”

“Guys, look,” Tor said. “No one knows anything. Please, I beg you. Don’t say anything. Don’t turn me in.”

“That’s rich coming from *you*,” Wool spat with sarcasm, “You’re lucky Jaycee didn’t switch you off and wear your reproductive organs as a bracelet.”

Tor sighed, close to tears. A pathetic sight, aided none by the fact he was standing in his briefs, “Please?”

“It’s out of our control now, *good buddy*,” Tripp patted the creases on his inner-suit pants, “You made your bed. You sleep in it.”

Wool cleared her throat and held her head in her hands, “God, my head is pounding. My guts feel like they’ve been through a grinder,” She held her arm over her bra in a bid to protect her modesty, “Did I hear you correctly?”

“Yes, Wool. We’re going home,” Tripp tore his eyes away from her chest and slipped the top half of his suit over his head, “Better get ready.”

Wool scanned the room. All but one crew member was accounted for, “Where’s Bonnie?”

Everyone looked at their feet. They’d remembered what happened and were as stunned as each other that Wool hadn’t.

“She didn’t make it,” Tripp unraveled his inner-suit down his front and slipped on his boots, “Don’t you remember?”

Wool stared at the ground and bit her lip, “Yes. I remember now.”

Images from the battle on Pink Symphony flooded into her brain. She took a deep breath, puzzled by her feelings on the matter.

One crew member remained unaccounted for.

“Where’s Jelly—?”

CRREEEAAAAAKKK.

All eyes averted to the cat’s hyper-sleep pod.

CLUNK-CLINK-CLINK-CLINK.

Four Titanium infinity claws rose out from the pod and pressed their way across the ceramic edge.

“Me… *owww*…”

Wool held her chest with amazement, “Jelly, honey?”

Bonnie, Tor, and Jaycee backed up and watched a huge furry arm lift up from within the chamber.

“That… was a *long* sleep,” came a husky voice from within. The infinity claws on her right hand pressed against the adjacent wall of the pod.

“Oh m-my *God*…” Wool took three cautious steps forward and risked invading Jelly’s privacy, “Honey?”

“Mommy? Is that you?” came a sultry, female voice of an adult. “Did we die?”

Jaycee and Tor remained still, as did Tripp. Would Wool approach whatever it was inside the pod? If she did, would whatever lay inside freak out and attack her?

“Wool, be careful,” Tripp whispered. “She’s still a cat, after all.”

“It’s okay,” Wool focused on the pod and crept forward, “Honey? We’re not dead. You can come out, now. We’re going home.”

"Are we?"

"Yes," Wool just about managed to squeeze the word out of her mouth, "Why d-don't you come out from the pod?"

"It wasn't this small when I went in," Jelly whined, "It's shrunk."

She sat up straight and faced the others.

The first thing they noticed was her face. No longer an innocent and sweet adolescent half-cat. Her jawline and whiskers had thickened. The fur on her face had all but fallen away.

The second thing they noticed was her bust. Jelly was well-endowed, by all accounts.

"My tummy's stuck," she growled and lifted her top half out from the unfeasibly tight oblong that contained the rest of her body, "Ah, that's much better."

"Honey, y-you're—" Wool couldn't finish her sentence. Jelly's beautiful tail swished out and slapped against the side of the pod.

"Jesus Christ," Tor said. "How did that pod even contain her?"

Tripp shook his head, taking in Jelly's evolution, "I don't know, I —"

"—Meow," Jelly swung her left hind leg out from the pod and slammed her heel against the ground, sending a shudder across the ground. Everyone felt it and gasped.

"Just one…. More…"

SCHTOMP.

Her right heel dug into the floor. The muscles in her arms flexed through her fur, "Ngggg…"

She straightened her arms and pushed herself to her feet. Her head almost hit the ceiling.

Tripp, Jaycee, and Tor's eyes tilted up and took in her new size.

Wool started crying at the sight of the girl's back, "Honey…"

Jelly swished her tail. Her long, orange-brown locks fell over her shoulder blades as she looked up at the ceiling.

CRUNCH-CRICK!

She rolled her shoulders and moved her head, cracking the kinks out of her neck and shoulders, "Feels good to be out of there."

Jelly stood seven-and-a-half feet in height. She appeared to be wider in frame, too – the technical equivalent of a somewhat over-sized adult female. Not an ounce of fat anywhere on her.

"Jelly, how are you feeling?" Tripp asked.

Her cat ears twitched. She moved her arms in front of her chest and faced away to preserve her modesty, "I feel *great.*"

Tor looked down at her behind. He followed the swishing of her tail around with his eyes, "B-But but…"

Jelly turned back to them. Her curvaceous frame and trim legs

were an astonishing sight to behold.

An truly exquisite vision.

Then, the bulge in her stomach came into view as she completed her turn. She held her claws over her belly.

"That's one helluva *pussy,*" Jaycee muttered. For the first time in his life he felt threatened – scared, even. A much bigger being shared the room with him, now. Anyone with decent vision could see that Jelly could kick the guy around the room and have him for lunch.

"Hey, don't talk about her like that," Wool said. "Look at her. You think this is what she wanted?"

"I didn't mean *pussy* in a derogatory way. She *is* a cat, after all. I meant a *pussycat*—"

"—Shut up," Jelly roared at the pair with fierce volume, "Both of you."

Tripp stood to attention and gulped at her instruction.

Jelly's chest heaved in and out with anger. She extended her first infinity claw on her right paw and pointed at Jaycee, "You."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you," she said. Her feminine voice was huskier than ever before, "Did you just call me a pussy?"

"No, I d-didn't mean it like—"

"—You want me to show you how cute I am?" Jelly kicked the side of her pod in anger, "Come here and I'll show you how easy I am to pet, you massive, metal turd."

"I'm sorry."

"Good," Jelly stepped forward and loomed over the petrified man, "Then show me my respect. Bow down."

"Wh-what?"

"Show me my respect," she repeated. "Bow down."

Jaycee looked to Tripp for a get-out. Not only was the attempt unsuccessful, it also angered Jelly even further.

"What are you looking at him for?"

"I, uh—"

"—I'm not playing around, Jaycee. Show me my respect and *bow down.*"

"Okay, okay," Jaycee held out his arms and fell on one knee, "I'm doing it. I'm sorry—"

"—Don't you *dare* apologize to me, Nayall. Just do as I say."

Jaycee kept his mouth shut and hung his head in front of her. A giant purr erupted in her abdomen as she looked down at him.

"I'm bigger than you, now. Don't ever forget it. Stand up."

He did as instructed and arched his back, wondering what was coming next.

Jelly turned away and made for the door. "By the way, Jaycee?"

"Yes?"

She nodded at the slider on the wall and pointed to her stomach, "Mind if I borrow one of your exo-suits? Bonnie's kid's jeans are no use to me, anymore."

"No, not at all."

"I don't think the others' inner-suits will fit me."

"I agree," he said, thankful that he was still alive, "You go ahead and take whatever you want."

She made her way through the door, "Thanks, *human*. See you on the control deck."

SWISH-SCHUNT.

The door slid shut, leaving the others beyond dumbfounded. Tripp looked to the others and thought twice about his next sentence.

"Uh, I guess she's in charge now?"

Tor tapped him on the shoulder, "Good luck telling her otherwise, *good buddy.*"

* * *

Jelly stormed along the level three walkway and kept her head down. The protruding bars across the upper sections of the wall threatened to smack her in the face as she moved past them.

A growl whirled inside her stomach. She stopped in her tracks and pressed her claws along at her belly.

"Miew…" she cried. Her knees nearly buckled. She pressed the pads on her palms against them, trying her best to contain the pink, glowing orb within, "God… I feel sick…"

She managed to turn the corner take hold of the staircase railing. The end of her claws scraped against her wrist, slicing off the ends of a few strands of fur.

BLOICK!

Her hips thrust so hard she nearly tumbled backwards down the stairs. She pulled herself forward and slid down a couple of steps. A whimpering came from within her throat as she spluttered and reached the last step.

"Guhhh…" she stretched her mouth wide open, along with her eyes, "Oh my tummy… ugh…"

She twisted her body around and planted her behind on the top step, accidentally trapping her tail. Her waist tilted forward and released, "Ugghhh…"

Her heels dug into the third step, trying to kick the intense pain away.

"*Oh God*, not now—"

GRUMBLE… GROOOWWWL…

Jelly held her breath. The pain and rumbling in her stomach abated and settled down. She breathed a sigh of relief.

CLANG.

Sparks flicked up from her claws as they scraped against the railing. She hoisted herself back to her feet and stormed up the next set of stairs.

The Control Deck

Space Opera Beta – Level One

Jelly made a beeline for the flight deck.

Manuel paused his work on with the communications panel when he saw her enter the room, "Jelly, you're here."

"Yeah," she kept her focus on screen on the flight deck as she approached it, "I heard comms are back on. Patch me into N-Gage. Now."

Manuel tilted his covers in confusion, "Oh *my*, you have grown."

She pulled the chair out from under the desk and spun it around, "No," she quipped, "Do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do *think so*. Your height. Your *frame*, if I can call it that?"

"Stop looking at me like some kind of weirdo," Jelly lifted her tail the way female humans hitch their skirts and slumped into the chair, "Patch me into N-Gage. Anderson household, Chrome Valley. Do it now."

"But, we're awaiting rescue—"

"—Hey, Manuel?" she snapped.

"Yes?"

"Do you want me to scratch your eyes out and hump the sockets?"

"Umm, *no*?"

Puzzled, he fluttered further away from her, "It's just that we're awaiting contact with Opera Charlie to establish—"

"—Aww, God *damn* it," Jelly slammed the flight deck with her claws and spun her chair around, "You're not listening to me. I want you to patch me into N-Gage. Now."

"But I—"

"—Make no mistake, you floating piece of crap. I want to speak to Jamie and tell him I love and miss him. Not that I have to explain my actions to you."

Manuel tried to calm her down.

"Miss Anderson. I'm fully aware that you, like the others, miss

your family. But if we connect to Earth it could jeopardize our bridge with Charlie. We must keep the channel free for—"

"—What's the first rule?"

"Uh, I wasn't aware there was a *first* rule, Miss Anderson?"

"Oh, then let me enlighten you. The first rule is I get what I want. Everything that ever was, is, and ever *will* be is mine. All mine. Do you understand what I've just said?"

"Uh, yes?" Manuel lowered himself, hoping not to get swiped by her vicious infinity claws.

"I want to see Jamie. Now patch me in."

"Okay, okay… don't have *kittens*," Manuel said as the color drained from his covers.

"Har-har, very funny," Jelly stopped herself from giggling at Manuel's inspired quip, "Let's see how funny you are when I tear your covers off, comedian."

"Patching you in now. Please be quick."

"I'll take as long as I want, you encyclopedic-*head*."

"Oh, come now, Miss Anderson. That was uncalled for."

Jelly threatened to push herself off the chair and punch the communications panel.

"Shut up and do your job or I'll tear out your pages and Origami them into a baseball bat and smack you around the covers with it."

"*Fine*," Manuel paused in mid-air, enabling the flight deck screen to come to life, "Here we go."

"*Thank* you," Jelly turned to the screen and briefly caught a glimpse of her own face in the glass. She didn't recognize herself at all. The girl who'd battled on Pink Symphony was no longer present. Instead, a beautiful half-cat looked at her. The screen beeped and displayed white text.

N-Gage
Anderson Residence
Chrome Valley, United Kingdom.
Dialing…

"Come on, come on," she spat, impatiently, "Answer, Jamie."

The screen wobbled around and flushed into white static. A shape of a man's face formed within the dots.

Tony, Emily's husband, appeared on screen and looked into the lens, "Hello. Who's this?"

Jelly shook her head and winced at Tony's face, "Who's *this*?"

"Sorry, who are you trying to reach?" Tony said.

"I want to see Jamie."

Tony's face peered against the screen as he tried to ascertain who, exactly, this strange half-cat, half-women was, "Who are you?"

“I want Jamie. Put Jamie on.”

“Not until you tell me who you are,” Tony looked under the screen and then back at Jelly, “USARIC?”

“My name is Jelly *Anderson*.”

Tony raised his eyebrows in amazement, “*You’re* J-Jelly Anderson?”

“Yes. Put Jamie on.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Don’t care. I want Jamie.”

“He’s not here, I’m afraid,” Tony whispered. “He’s at school.”

Jelly’s face fell, fueled with anger. She tapped the side of the screen with her claw as if trying to goad a mouse, “No. No, I want Jamie.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “If you call in a few hours when he’s home, I’ll let him know you—”

“—I want Jamie,” Jelly burst into tears and clenched her fist.

KER-SMASH!

She punched through the screen and smashed the glass, severing the connection. “Agggghhhh!” She took the screen’s wires in her paw and tore them out like a bunch of stringy intestines. The force yanked the screen from the desk. It whipped off the deck and crashed to the floor. Sparks and jolts of spent electricity whizzed into the air, underscoring her juvenile-like sobs.

The color came back to Manuel as he whirred back to life, “All done?”

“No,” Jelly wept and stomped her feet on the ground in a tantrum, “He wasn’t there.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—”

“—What’s all this shouting?” Tripp walked into the control deck and immediately spotted the wreckage on the floor, “What happened?”

He looked up and saw the torn wires and cables hanging across Jelly’s infinity claws, “Jelly?”

“What?”

“Did you do this?”

“Yes. *Bad* screen.”

“You can’t go around damaging USARIC property like this. They’ll dock our wages if there’s any damage done.”

“So?”

Tripp crouched down and scooped the battered monitor into his arms. The wires streaked from the shattered glass a few meters away in Jelly’s claws.

“Jelly. Let go of the wires.”

“No.”

"Jelly, I'm the captain of this ship. You have to obey me."

She tugged taut on the wires and refused to let go, "*Mine*."

"No, Jelly. *Not* yours. Let go of the wires. I need to get this screen fixed."

"*Mine*," Jelly coiled the metal connector at the end of each strand around her wrist. She wrapped each infinity claw around it and tugged it back to her hip, forcing Tripp to walk toward her.

"I'm not going to say it again, you bad girl. This is a direct order. Let go of the wires."

"No," she reached across the taut wires with her other paw and gripped them, pulling him closer still, "It's mine."

"Look at it. It's useless. What do you want a broken screen for?"

"Don't care. It's *mine*."

Tripp dropped the broken device to the floor. Jelly's elbows hit the flight deck due to the lack of pull.

"*Fine*. You want a broken flight screen and a fistful of wires? You got it."

He let go of the cables and turned to Manuel in a huff.

"Update on Charlie, please."

"Miss Anderson used the frequency to call home. I'm afraid if they had attempted to make contact, we would have missed it."

"Why did you let her make the call?"

"She threatened to scratch my eyes out and make love to the sockets—"

"—Hump them, actually," Jelly corrected him.

"That's right. She threatened to remove my eyes and hump the—"

"—You don't even *have* eyes, you dummy," Tripp spat, about ready to explode with anger, "Manuel, you can't let Anderson tell you what to do. She's not in charge—"

"—Pardon my forwardness, Tripp. But didn't you just cave in to her demands seconds ago?"

Tripp watched Manuel indicate the battered screen. He knew the book was right. His dignity begged to differ. An ill-advised retort formed in two seconds and flew out of Tripp's mouth before his brain had a chance to give it the green light.

"That's not the point."

"Miew—" Jelly acted the sweet, innocent pet.

"You shut up, too," Tripp kicked the communications panel in anger, "You've been nothing but trouble since you came back from that… *thing*."

"What thing?"

"After you disappeared on Pink Symphony and went swimming," Tripp yelled. "You've changed, you know that? Nothing but a spoiled little brat. The others are scared of you, now. You're walking all over

them. But not me, Anderson. I'm not scared of you."

He stopped screaming and caught his breath. The pause allowed the reality of the situation to flood his mind.

"God *damn* it, I'm trying to talk sense into a *cat*," he muttered. "We must have died. I'm in purgatory, that's the only explanation. I'm an Androgyne. A robot telling off a household cat who's turned into a woman."

"Miew…" Jelly whimpered, apologetically. No English spoken, but the tone said it all. She felt sorry for him.

"What are you saying now?"

"I'm sorry, Tripp."

"Really?"

She shook her head and wagged her tail, "No. Not really. But I know you humans like to be told sorry."

"I should have figured," Tripp sighed and pressed his hands against the comms panel, "Jelly?"

"Yes, *human*?"

"Don't make judgments like that until you have all the facts," he blurted, mourning his entire existence, "Do me a favor?"

"Do I *have* to?"

"No."

"Then I don't want to," She licked her lips and yawned in his face.

"I admire your honesty," he muttered just loud enough to for her to hear.

"I've never lied in my entire life," Jelly dug her tongue into the crook in her gums, "I don't even know how to lie. I know you humans do, though. I've seen it with my own eyeballs."

"With your own *eyes*, Jelly."

"All of them, yes."

"Okay, you won't apologize. I get it. You're a cat. You don't give a rat's ass—"

"—I can catch a rat and give you its ass as a trophy—"

"—No, no," Tripp gave up the ghost and turned to Manuel, "That's not what I—It's a turn of phrase. Means you don't care."

Jelly didn't feel the need to respond. Tripp, once again, was spot on with his assessment – and she wasn't going to correct him. She genuinely *didn't* give a rat's ass about his feelings.

"And to be quite honest I'm starting to know how you feel."

"Miew," she offered, politely.

"Stop talking," Tripp cleared and prepared himself for action. Work needed doing, feelings be damned. He snapped his fingers at Manuel.

"Jaycee is at Weapons and Armory. Wool's at Medix, and Bonnie's checking out Botanix. Can we try to establish comms with Charlie

once again, please? Provide something of a salutation for their arrival?"

"Certainly, Tripp."

Jelly rose out of her chair, "I need the bathroom."

"Yes, go and get ready. There's a good girl," Tripp lifted the keyboard and hit the return key, "Manuel, I'm going to my quarters to get ready. I've advised the others to do the same. In the meantime, commence connection to Opera Charlie on a frequency of zero, four five, niner—"

SPRIIIIISHHH…

Tripp turned around, slowly, hoping the sound coming from the corner of the control deck wasn't what he feared it would be.

No such luck.

Jelly crouched in the corner and relieved herself all over the floor. He couldn't help but sneer and lament the fate of the universe.

"*Really*?"

Jelly shrugged and continued her business with a 'when you gotta go, you gotta go,' look on her furry adult face.

"Unbelievable," Tripp shook his head in dismay and walked out.

CHAPTER TEN

USARIC Data Point

Space Opera Charlie

Days traveled: 545

Distance to Enceladus: 178,616 miles

The Hyper-Sleep Chamber

Level Five

A low hum crept around the chamber. It dispelled an otherwise perfect silence. The lights snapped on, illuminating the circular quarters.

Three hyper-sleep pods fanned out like a star from the central feeding column.

The first of the three pods shimmied to life. The screen blanketing its occupier slid into its housing.

WHIZ-WHIR.

A pair of eyebulbs blinked, “Captain?” Its squeaky voice woke Oxade from his slumber.

He opened his eyes and immediately squeezed them shut, shifting his body around the pod’s foam interior, “Oh, God. My head.”

“It’ll take some time to get oriented.”

Oxade pressed his elbows onto the fabric and lifted the top half of his body upright. Poz Bass, one half of the death drone duo, spun his head around three-hundred-and-sixty-degrees.

“Welcome to the vicinity of Enceladus.”

“Are we there?”

“Yes, five-hundred-and-forty-five days of sleep,” Poz extended his rope-like arm and bopped thumped the glass case on Nutrene’s pod. She didn’t react, “Manuel-2 asked us to wake you up for debriefing ahead of the others.”

“Okay.”

Oxade threw his legs over the side of the pod and placed his bare feet on the ground. Poz forgot that his captain was only wearing a pair

of briefs He looked away in shame.

“Hey, it’s okay, Poz. We’re all guys together,” Oxade stood to his feet and gripped the oxygen tube attached to his pod. His balance was all over the place, “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“I respect your modesty, Oxade,” Poz trundled over to Alex’s pod and pressed his ‘nose’ – which resembled more a mini ventilation shaft – against the screen, “Look at him. Fast asleep.”

“What did you and Neg do to pass the time?” Oxade ran his fingertips over his five o’clock shadow as he stared in the mirror.

“We played chess for a while,” Poz chirped. “I won, of course.”

“Of course,” Oxade cleared his throat and opened the slider next to the mirror. His enhanced leather USARIC mercenary jacket floated inside, “I’d expect nothing less.”

“Men are much better at games than women, aren’t they?”

Oxade threw his arms into the jacket sleeves. The five letters in his name lit up on the outer part of his upper right arm, “Well, technically, you and Neg are *both* sexes,” he said as he reached into his pockets.

“Don’t patronize me,” Poz moved his head away from Alex’s pod and watched his captain unfold his gloves, “We are both, yet we are neither.”

“You’re vicious little bastards,” Oxade finished, snapping his gloves onto his hands, “How did you get on with Manuel-2?”

“Oh, she and Pure Genius cheated. Destroyed me in five moves—”

“—No, *not* in chess, you dummy,” Oxade removed a belt from the cupboard and strapped it around his waist, “I mean generally.”

“Neg is at the control deck with Manuel-2. They’re trying to communicate with Opera Beta.”

“I want an update,” Oxade fanned his fingers out on both hands and pushed them down his thighs. A tight synthetic material unraveled from his waist, down his thighs, past his knees and secured around his ankles.

“We found what we are looking for. We want to bring you up to speed before the others awake.”

Oxade snapped his fingers “Suits me. Is it bad news?”

“I’d say so, yes.”

Oxade made the mistake of patting Poz on the back. The metal crept along his glove for a second and fizzed up a mini electrical storm, “Oww.”

“It’s better that you don’t touch me.”

“Yes, I forgot. I’ve been out of action for the best part of two years,” Oxade made for the door and took a final glance at Alex and Nutrene’s hyper-sleep pods, “I dunno why they bothered with two separate pods.”

“What are you implying, Captain?” Poz couldn’t process the funny quip.

“Nothing,” Oxade returned to the door, “Okay, my messed-up friend. Let’s go and see Manuel-2. We’ll wake the two lovebirds up after the debrief.”

Control Deck

Space Opera Charlie

Opera Charlie’s control deck was of similar build and shape as Opera Beta’s, only on a smaller scale. The flight panel stood in front of the windshield. It offered a glorious view of Saturn and the surrounding galaxy-scape.

Oxade’s acclimation had all but been resolved, “Right, where is he?” he asked Poz, who followed behind.

“They’re here, somewhere.”

Oxade noticed something unfamiliar and out of place resting against the wall by the communications deck. A five-foot-high slab of metal in the shape of a sword. A five inch slit formed at the top and drew down the surface, “Ah, you’re awake.”

“Did that weapon just speak to me?”

Poz shook his head and chuckled, “Neg, stop playing around. Show Captain Weller some respect.”

“Sorry,” the slit crept down the length of the blade and stretched in half. The two shafts of metal formed into Neg’s original size and shape – a three-foot droid with blue lights streaking across her ‘scalp’, “Just calibrating. Preparing for the inevitable.”

“Neg, I want you to go to the hyper-sleep quarters and release Hughes and Byford.”

“Why do I have to do it?” Neg twisted her head around and bounced up and down on the spot.

“Because I said so. I’m your captain. Are you defying a direct order?”

“No, no, no,” she said. “It’s just that I get all the crappy jobs.”

“Yes. And until Poz perishes, that’s how it’ll always be. Now, just shut up and do it.”

“Yes, Captain,”

She stuck her tongue out at Poz and made her way out of the control deck.

“Honestly,” Poz shook his head, “Didn’t she read the instruments and articles manual on appropriate conduct?”

“Speaking of which, where’s Manuel-2?”

Oxade trained his eyes on Saturn and absorbed her wondrous beauty.

"Manuel-2?" Poz bounded around the room with excitement, "Your captain is here."

A holographic book appeared in the air by the flight panel. A husky feminine voice issued from the pages, "Good whenever-it-is, Oxade. I'm glad you could join us, finally,"

"Manuel-2?"

Oxade walked around the book and took in Manuel-2's ridiculous thickness. She resembled an encyclopedia more than Opera Beta's paperback autopilot.

"Please, Captain. For the sake of confusion, I'd rather you refer to me as *Manny*," the weighty book slapped its back cover to the floor and fanned out, "We don't have time to waste. Are you ready for the debrief?"

"Yes, show me."

Manny projected a holograph of their current coordinates. Saturn, represented as a giant circle, hung to the right of a flashing Enceladus.

"We entered the vicinity of Saturn forty-eight hours ago. After establishing Enceladus, we noticed a foreign object in its orbit. It wasn't there when we set off, according to the Star Drone reports."

"Do we know what it is?" Oxade moved into the holograph and enlarged the tiny object with his fingers, "This white thing, the resolution is worse than 8k definition. I can barely make it out."

"That white *thing*, as you put it, is Space Opera Beta."

Shocked at the news, Oxade swallowed hard and enlarged the image as far as he could. He flung his arms sideways and walked through its blocky rendition, "It's the shape of a cone. You're right. This must be Opera Beta."

"It *is* Opera Beta, Oxade," Manny said. "Don't question my reports. They are infallible."

"Have you established communication with them?"

"Several times, yes."

"And?"

"No response. I can reasonably deduce from their lack of communication that the crew are all dead, or—"

"—or in hyper-sleep?" Oxade nodded at Poz. "Can you sat-link to Opera Beta and retrieve their autopilot's set of data points? Get some idea of the state they're in?"

"Certainly," Poz rolled over to the communications panel and fired it up, "We don't know the link code, though. It'll be protected."

Oxade reduced the image and made his way over to the control panel, "I find it difficult to believe that their Manuel refuses to talk to ours. They must be dead."

Poz tapped away at the keyboard and looked up at the screen, “Good. Makes our job a lot easier, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does,” Oxade turned to Manny to find her lying on the floor, “Okay, that’s enough. Stop lying on the job.”

“Yes, Oxade.”

“Tell me about Weapons & Armory,” Oxade unbuckled the leather on his left sleeve and inspected his forearm’s Individimedia panel, “Patch me into Beta’s comms frequency.”

“Certainly,” Manuel beeped and threw a bolt of green light at the glass on the comms panel, temporarily diverting Poz’s attention as he worked on the keyboard, “Hey. Ask first.”

“Shut up, you ball of technological inferiority,” Manny’s sultry voice sounded more of a come-on than a put-down.

Poz twisted his cylindrical head around and scowled at the book, “What did you just call me?” His rope-like arm stiffened, forming a serrated edge, and prepared to strike her.

“You heard.”

“No. I didn’t. Repeat it—”

“—Hey, enough of your *lessense*,” Oxade stepped in between them and held out his arms, “Damn it, you’re meant to be state-of-the-art technology. Not jumped-up, melodramatic *simple machines*. Okay?”

Poz fought hard to suppress his desire to stab Manny in her chest. Of course, it would have proved to be futile. Knowing Poz’s fortune of late, he’d end up walking through her and spearing his own body.

Manny threw a beam from her central pages and made contact with the communications deck, “You may be our captain, Captain. But don’t *ever* call me a simple machine again.”

Oxade clenched his fists, struggling with the sheer temerity on display by his two colleagues, “Christ alive. You two really do put the *artificial* in artificial intelligence, don’t you?”

“He started it,” Manny affected a sarcastic huff and started to extract the data from the comms panel via her beam.

“I did not start it,” Poz muttered. “I’ll shut you down and use your memory as toilet paper.”

“You don’t have an ass, you ass.”

Oxade threw his left arm forward.

SCHUNT-CLICK.

A Rez-9 firearm slapped into his palm, having traveled up the length of his sleeve.

“I swear to God. If you two don’t stop bickering, I’m putting a bullet right in the middle of deck.”

“Okay, fine,” Manny said. “I’ll look the other way.”

Oxade stepped over to Poz, “Suits me. What’s the situation with the live link to Beta?”

“Need the pass-code.”

“Try A-W-A-K-E-4-5-7,” Oxade looked at the transparent password box hanging in front of the deck, “It’s what Beta uses to reactivate their antiquated piece of junk autopilot.”

“On it,” Poz punched away at the keys. He kept a crafty eye on Manny, who had spun around to face the windshield.

BZZZZ.

“Incorrect,” Poz said. “Got any other suggestions?”

Oxade slammed the deck, “Sonofa—”

“—There’s no need to swear, Captain,” Poz said.

“It’s my goddamn ship and I’ll fricken well swear if I want to, okay?”

“It’s beneath you,” Poz looked at the empty pass-code box, waiting for an intelligent response.

“Make no mistake, my little ball of death. *You’re* beneath me in this particular hierarchy, and don’t you ever forget it,” Oxade ran his hands through his slicked-back hair and took a deep breath. He needed to calm down and keep his professionalism intact; both for the sake of the crew and his own sanity, “We haven’t been here a day and already we’re failing.”

“Transfer complete,” Manny spun around and displayed the text results across the central pages of her book-body.

Oxade tried to read the text but it was far too small, “What does it say?”

“Last recorded data point suggests that the crew were on seventy-two hours oxygen. According to Beta’s second-in-command, Tripp Healy, many of them have fallen *one-hundred-and-eleven*.”

“Eh?” Oxade leaned into the text on her page and raised his eyebrows. Manny had mistaken the word ‘ill’ for a number.

“It says *ill*, you cretin. Not one-hundred-and-eleven.”

“I’m sorry, I thought it was numeric—”

“—Captain, I am at a loss for what to type as the password—” Poz announced, before being rudely interrupted.

“—Shut up for a minute,” Oxade returned to Manny. “How long ago was the data point recorded?”

“Two years ago. Approximately. Would you like the exact time in days, hours, minutes and seconds—”

“—No, I’ve heard enough,” Oxade went to pat Poz on the back, remembered the intense pain it caused the last time. He pulled his hand away and stared at the vicious-looking lump of technology, “Ah, forget it.”

Poz cylinder ‘head’ revolved as his eyebulbs followed Oxade to the door.

“Did you want something, Captain?”

“Three days of oxygen in two years? No response to our communication attempts? They’re definitely all dead. This is going to be the easiest salary we’ve ever earned,” Oxade palmed the panel on the wall and opened the door, “Manny, how long till we can bridge with Beta?”

“Three or four hours.”

“Keep establishing contact every ninety seconds. The more they don’t respond, the more likely they’re dead. We’ll get on board, take what we want, kill anything we find, and go home.”

Oxade walked out of the control deck, “And try not to tear each other’s throats out until I get back, at least.”

Poz and Manny scowled at each other.

* * *

Alex struggled with the jarring effects of his hyper-sleep. He gripped the edge of his pod and suppressed the urge to vomit.

“God, my organs feel like pâté.”

Nutrene, on the other hand, was used to the feeling. Alex couldn’t understand how she was able to hop to her feet and casually make her way over to the sink.

“Hey, it’s perfectly natural to feel like crap,” Nutrene said.

She looked into the basin mirror and focused on his trim figure. Dressed only in her USARIC-issued underwear, she licked her lips at the glorious sight, “You should scrunch your toes and walk around for a bit. Try to reorient yourself.”

She turned to the corner of the chamber and saw Neg spinning around, calibrating her extended arm.

“Neg, can you get our friend, here, a glass of water?”

“Certainly.”

“Yeah,” Alex pushed himself to his feet and stumbled forward, “Oh dear, no. No.”

“Hey,” Nutrene raced over and caught him as he fell to the floor. She hooked her arms under his and lifted him back to his feet, face-to-face.

She looked into his eyes, “Alex, stand up straight. It’s the best thing for you.”

“It doesn’t feel like it,” he pushed her back and tried to remain still.

“Muscle fatigue. Quite normal after such a long journey.”

Alex moved his hands in front of his body. He took one step forward and wobbled on the spot.

“A bit like learning to walk again,” Nutrene watched on as he put

his other foot forward, “There, you got it.”

Neg rolled over to Alex and extended her metal retractor. At the end of it was a glass of water which she offered to Alex, “Drink this. Fresh H2O.”

“I know what it is,” Alex took the glass from Neg and sniffed around the rim, “Fresh?”

“Yes, Charlie has the latest filtration system installed. Fresher than fresh, actually.”

He took a sip. The trickle of water worked its way down his throat and into his stomach. So intense was the sensation that he visualized the liquid revitalizing his body and organs. It made him close his eyes, thankful for the small mercies in life.

Nutrene giggled at his reaction as she opened the cabinet door, “Good?”

“God, yeah,” he muttered in ecstasy, “*Damn* good.”

“Gotta keep that impressive physique of yours on-point if we’re going to do our job.”

Alex looked down the length of his body. The fine hairs around his well-defined chest and abdomen seemed to stand on end, almost as if it had been rubbed with a balloon.

“What’s that?”

Neg swiveled her cylindrical head and flashed her eyebulbs, “Interference, probably. We’re trying to establish contact with Opera Beta.”

“We’ve found Opera Beta?” Nutrene picked out her USARIC inner-suit jacket from the cupboard. She slipped her arms through the sleeves and inspected the lapels around her neck, “That was fast. How long ago?”

“A few hours. She’s orbiting Enceladus, but isn’t communicating,” Neg said.

Alex looked in the mirror above the wash basin and analyzed his face. As expected, he’d grown an impressive amount of facial hair during stasis. Today, he looked like a different person. His hirsute facial rendition in the mirror added a few years.

“I guess we’re going to board, anyway,” he said.

“Of course we are. Invite or no invite.”

Nutrene placed her hand on Alex’s shoulder and smiled at him via the mirror, “The beard suits you, you know.”

“It’s coming straight off once I’m dressed,” he moved his eyes to her reflection, “How come you’re not feeling groggy after such a long journey, anyway?”

“I’m used to it,” she extended a strap in her hands and placed her right, bare foot on the side of the hyper-sleep pod, “Seven visits to IMS. You get used to it.”

Alex couldn't help but look at her flagrant exposure of her thigh as she strapped the belt around her waist. She thumbed the hook and enabled the material to crawl across her skin and turn her porcelain-white skin a synthetic black.

Alex averted his eyes to her face, "What were you doing on the International Moon Station?"

"USARIC set up a Medix center there a couple of years ago. A part of their expansion after the success of the Star Cat Project back in twenty-one-eighteen."

She thumped the sole of her foot onto the floor and jogged on the spot, working her new pants down to her shins, "I guess they wanted to keep animals on standby there."

"You *guess*?"

"They never told us their mission aim. Top secret. My job was to tend to the felines and provide updates. And not to ask questions."

"Are you saying there are cats on the moon?"

"Yup," Nutrene unbuckled her left sleeve and revealed a metal rail sewn inside, "Only a couple. They had their ICs installed."

"The infinity claws?"

"You know your acronyms, I'll give you that."

She flung her arm forward. A Rez-9 firearm rolled along the inner sleeve rail and landed comfortably in her palm. She aimed the firearm at Neg, "You. Stay there, I need to calibrate."

"Please do not point your firearm at me, Nutrene. I work with you."

"Shut up, just hold still," she pressed her thumb on the side of the barrel. A rectangular HUD holograph floated above the sight. The surface drew a white line around Neg's bulbous shape. The phrase *death drone* flashed next to it.

"Pow," Nutrene pretended to shoot Neg and finished with a smirk, "Bang on target."

Neg wasn't nearly as impressed.

"Nutrene, do you know that you should never aim a gun at the people you're working with?"

"You're not a person," Nutrene winked at Alex. "Besides, a Rez-9 charge wouldn't even put a chink in your armor."

The fact surprised Alex.

"It won't?"

"No. Wanna see?" Nutrene aimed her Rez-9 at Neg once again, "Let me show you."

Neg rolled back and beeped in protest, "Please, don't—"

BLAMM!

The charge blasted out of the barrel and flew through the air. It collided with Neg's metallic surface and disintegrated into

nothingness. A couple of orange sparks to flew into the air.

"See?"

"That was just rude," Neg huffed and rubbed her head. "Don't do that again."

"*Amaziant*," Alex said. "Poz and Neg are indestructible?"

Nutrene held her left forearm up and allowed the gravity to return her gun to the crook of her elbow.

"Ha, yeah. Trust Manning/Synapse to include *that* in the Death Drone series."

"I don't trust any of their wacky technology as far as I could throw them," Alex made his way to the cupboard and opened the door, "The Series Three units were a good idea, but, like most of USARIC's endeavors, they were flawed."

"Like most humans, I guess. Only we don't freak out and behave like lemmings when we remember who we really are."

Alex pulled out his USARIC jacket and looked at his name on the sleeve, "Beta's full of them."

"Ooooh," Nutrene pursed her lips and nodded her head, impressed, "You figured that out all on your own, did you? The odds are very high that they'll have killed themselves. Save us the trouble, and the ammunition."

Alex slipped the jacket on.

"Why do you think they named the ship *Beta*, and not Bravo?"

Nutrene's eyes grew at Alex's revelation, "Huh. Good point. I thought each iteration was phonetic."

"If that was the case they'd have called her Opera *Bravo*," Alex grabbed the Rez-9 tucked into the left sleeve, "Sending a cat to Saturn with a bunch of messed-up androids? It was a test. Like a bunch of canaries or guinea pigs."

"I never thought of it that way. It makes complete sense. USARIC expected the mission to fail?"

"Did they *really* think sending a cat into space would work? The chances of success were literally millions to one, if that," Alex threw his left arm towards the ground. His Rez-9 slid down the length of his sleeve and landed in his palm, "It's a stupid idea. If it was a movie or a novel no one would believe it."

"Doesn't matter," Nutrene said. "We're here to rectify their stupid mistake."

* * *

Nutrene and Alex followed Neg as she rolled through the door to the control deck.

Oxade looked up from the communications panel and clapped eyes on Nutrene's mercenary get-up, "Hey."

"Hey."

"Sleep well?"

"Like a baby," she moved the chair from her path and grabbed his hand in hers. They clutched tightly and bumped fists, "How long you been up?"

Oxade checked her over and smiled, "A few hours, now. You look great."

"Oh, I *am* great. You know that," she nodded at Manny, "I heard we found Opera Beta?"

"Yeah, we did. We've just sent a message back to USARIC updating them on our findings."

Oxade caught Alex staring at him. He seemed to be lost in his own world. Oxade remained professional and refrained from causing any undue upset.

"Hey, soldier. You okay?"

"I'm fine. I just want to get this done."

"You seem anxious?" Oxade said. "Having second thoughts about the mission?"

"No."

Alex tugged at his sleeve. A sense of dread thumped against his chest.

Opera Beta edged closer and closer. Soon, Opera Charlie would bridge with them and instigate an intergalactic act of violence and death.

"Is your suit okay?" Oxade asked, knowing full well that it wasn't the merc gear upsetting the man.

"It's Kevlar and Technomex. I'm used to it."

"It'll save your life if we encounter a fight," Oxade waved Manny over to him, "Okay, enough BS. Manny, tell us about Opera Beta?"

Manny opened up and landed quarter of the way through her holographic tome.

Manuel-2

Space Opera Beta (second revision)

Pg 704,111

(exposition dump #99/4g)

Construction of *Space Opera Beta* commenced in 2116 at USARIC's Cape Claudius compound. More than one hundred tons in weight, it measures one thousand feet and contains ten levels.

The name underwent a last minute change in early 2118 before it set off on its voyage to Saturn. Originally known as *Space Opera Bravo*, the original team of humans were disbanded and summarily executed shortly after the conclusion of the *Star Cat Project*.

It was decided by then-chief Dimitri Vasilov and CEO Maar Sheck that the mission would be manned exclusively by Androgyne Series Three units to save on insurance and running costs. In addition, the winner of the *Star Cat Project*, Jelly Anderson, joined them.

Captain Daryl Katz and botanist Haloo Ess were the only human beings on board. Along with Beta's on-board computer, The Manuel, these were the only entities who knew the true nature of their colleagues – the Androgyne Series Three units. It is understood that Katz and Ess did not survive the link with *Opera Alpha*.

Data secured from her last communication advises that there are six souls on board at this current time.

1: Tripp Healy, formerly first officer. Assumed rank of captain after the death of Daryl Katz. Former ASF (American Star Fleet) commander and communications and liaison specialist.

2: Dr Bonnie Whitaker. USARIC's then-chief scientist. Honorably discharged from ASF. Specialist in martial arts and prototyping.

3: Jaycee Nayall. Head of Weapons & Armory. Five years' service with ASF. Died during service and subsequently reconstituted.

4: Wool ar-Ban. Chief Medician and Medix liaison. Five years' service. Project medician coordinator of the Star Cat Project and caretaker of subject #6.

5: Tor Klyce. Head of communications and specialist in psychoanalysis.

6: Jelly Anderson. Domestic household cat, and runner-up of the Star Cat Project. Joined Opera Beta after the winner, Bisoubisou Gagarin (Russia) reported dead.

"Thanks, Manny," Oxade said.

"You're welcome."

"We don't know much else. What we *do* know is that the stupid

cat would have had something called *infinity claws* installed when they reached Saturn's vicinity."

Alex didn't hide his faux-puzzled expression, "ICs. I know *of* them, but I don't know what they actually are?"

"Titanium talons installed in place of her cuticles," Oxade said. "Also, micro-fibre whiskers. Designed to heighten the senses."

Alex jumped in to the explanation. "Right, they're for an extra layer of protection. The claws are like talons. I hear they're fierce."

"Really?" Oxade folded his arms and took a keen interest in Alex's expertize on the subject, "And the whiskers?"

"Anderson would have had a K-13 chip implanted just above her right shoulder so the crew can track her. The whiskers work in conjunction with it. As I say, heighten the senses," Alex lifted his left forearm and pointed at the three inked lines across his skin, "They also act as a rudimentary one-way communication channel, a bit like our *Viddy Media* installations."

"Wow, check out the big brains on Hughes, here," Nutrene licked her lips at him, suggestively, "Not just a fit body."

Oxade cleared his throat and grew suspicious, "That's very interesting, Alex."

"Yeah, out of *all* of Beta's crew, Anderson is the one we need to keep an eye on."

"I'm sure she is," Oxade grunted and punched his left arm forward. "There's just one thing I don't quite understand, though."

"What?"

Oxade's Rez-9 flew into his palm, "How do you know so much about Anderson?"

"Huh?"

Alex held his breath and eyed the gun in his captain's hand. 'Idiot,' he thought. He'd opened his big mouth and said too much. In acting dumb, he'd given the game away. The look in Oxade's face said everything. Alex knew that he knew.

The control deck started to close in.

If Alex hadn't been wearing gloves, both he and Nutrene would have seen his fingers covered in sweat.

"I, uh…" Alex didn't expect his voice to crack so blatantly.

Oxade tilted his Rez-9 and ran his thumb on the side lever, arming it, "Come on, explain."

"I, uh, just…"

"You *just* what?"

"I read up about it before we left—"

"—*Lessense*," Oxade lowered his gun and eyeballed Alex with a devilment usually reserved for people who murder family members, "I'm not stupid, you know. Don't think I haven't noticed what's going

on.”

“Wh-what? N-Nothing’s going on—”

“—Then wh-wh-why are you st-st-stuttering like a goddamn f-f-fool?” Oxade mocked with viciousness and aimed his gun at the boy’s face, “Answer me, you st-stuttering d-d-dick.”

“I j-just…”

“*Answer me*.”

“Oxade,” Nutrene screamed in his ear, “Are you out of your mind?”

“If he doesn’t answer me, he’ll get a Rez-9 charge in *his*,” Oxade pulled his index finger back, teasing the trigger, “Hughes?”

Alex licked the dryness from his lips and hyperventilated, “I’m n-not… I’m…”

“Who are you, *Alex Hughes*?” Oxade roared.

“I’m… I’m… Alex—”

His speech slowed to a complete halt.

The ground twisted into the air and punched him square in the face, knocking him flat out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Crew Quarters

Space Opera Beta

Tripp sat in front of his N-Gage screen and stared at the eleven-year-old boy on the screen; his son, Rogan. He'd begun to resemble his father. The comparison of their jaw lines and eyes were unmistakable.

Almost five years had passed since Tripp had left home. It had been ninety seconds since he spoke to his son.

Rogan's ears pricked up as Tripp's last sentence rolled into the front room. He turned to the screen.

"We're on a ninety-second delay, which will make talking to each other interesting, won't it? How is school?".

Rogan eventually sighed, "School is okay, Dad. I hate my math teacher. He's very strict. Why haven't you come home, yet?"

Tripp had to wait another ninety seconds for the message to reach him.

Rogan would be a teenager when he returned home. Tripp looked away from the screen and covered his face, refusing to reveal his emotions.

"Why are you crying, dad?"

Tripp wiped the pink liquid from his eyes and cleared his throat, "I'm not crying, son. It's just that I'm so happy to see you. Where's Spooky?"

Rogan leaned into the screen and moved his eyes left and right trying to soak up his father's quarters, "Is that your room?"

"Yes," Tripp muttered, "How is everyone?"

"Spooky died, dad," Rogan said, clearly antagonized by the memory of the event, "She got really ill. She really missed you after you left."

"Dead?" Tripp closed his eyes and felt the bottom of his heart crack open, "Oh."

Tripp wiped his face and saw his wife, Samantha, peer into the screen. She raised her eyebrows in shock before she burst into tears, "I thought you were dead."

Finally, a bit of good news to counterbalance the bad. His wife looked healthy and vibrant as she held their son against her chest.

"Why did you think Daddy was dead?"

"Oh God. Tripp," she traced the screen with her fingertip and

burst into tears, “Why didn’t you send us a message?”

“Aww, mom. Get off me.”

“What message? We couldn’t send any messages while we were away.”

Another ninety, torturous seconds passed by. It allowed both parties to absorb each other’s facial reactions. A sense of dread crept into the delayed conversation.

“Tripp, sweetie,” Samantha cried into the screen, “I’m *so* sorry.”

“What? What do you mean you thought I was *dead*?” Tripp slammed the desk, spilling his tears onto his fists, “I’m not dead. I’m coming home.”

“We thought they switched you off. They said they’d try to rebuild you if they ever found Opera Beta.”

Tripp ran his fingers under his left earlobe. He prodded his fingertips into his neck, seconds away from tearing his own throat out and ending it all.

“You knew I was an Androgyne?” He muttered through his weeping knowing it’d be *another* ninety seconds until he got confirmation from her, “You knew all along?”

Another man about the same age as Tripp leaned over Samantha. He ran his hands over her shoulder with over-familiarity, “Is this him, sweetie? Not bad-looking for a Series Three unit, is he?”

“*Sweetie*?” Tripp felt the saliva escape from his mouth. His esophagus turned to stone. The walls in his quarters threatened to entomb forever, “Wh-who’s *that*?”

Samantha took the man’s hand in hers and ran her face along his knuckles, “You can’t blame me, Tripp. I didn’t know. USARIC told us you didn’t make. They even paid for your funeral.”

“They did *what*?” Tripp huffed and yanked on his inner-suit collar, “No, no, no. This can’t be happening.”

She turned to the man and waved him away as gently as necessary, “Please, not now, Charley.”

“Okay, I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me,” he bent over and picked up a toddler in his arms.

“Who’s that?” Tripp gasped.

“Oh, *sweetie*,” Samantha tried to block the lens with her hand.

“No,” Tripp slammed the desk in fury, “Who the hell is *that*?”

“That’s Tracey, Dad,” Rogan said. “My little sister…”

“No-no-no…” Tripp stammered and felt his left arm tighten. A tingling sensation morphed into an agonizing jolt of pain down his left arm. His fingers moved from his ears and scrambled at the surface of his console, “I c-can’t,” he huffed and slid off his chair.

“Tripp, sweetie?” Samantha leaned into the screen, trying to see where he’d gone.

Everything went black.

* * *

When I was a little boy all I ever wanted to be was an astronaut.

I used to spend every waking second looking at the stars and the constellations. Before they became USARIC, the Space Agency used to show reports on Individimedia about what they found.

I remember when they found the first flat surface planet in Andromeda Twelve. It was so exciting to me. Imagine, a planet that wasn't like the shape of a giant soccer ball.

A place where, if you traveled far enough, you could fall off the edge of the universe.

My second love was my cat. I don't remember her name because it was so long ago. One day, we had to put her down because she was sick. The medician said she was in a lot of pain and I didn't like it. We never got to see the medician inject her and I liked that I never saw it.

I don't know about other people. When I think of things that happened in the past, I see them as images.

Right now I can see a bright new star in the night sky. It's not far from the Great Bear. You know it. The arrangement of stars that looks like a frying pan with a wonky handle.

I remember my teacher asked me one time, "Tripp, why are you so in love with space?"

I couldn't answer her.

Why do I love space so much? Because out there are billions upon billions of stars. The law of averages says there must be at least a million other lifeforms out there.

There has to be, right?

I don't regret my decision to put my health, family, and friends behind my first, true love.

Does that sound selfish?

The only thing I would have regretted was indecision…

* * *

Jaycee's thumbnail lay on the floor. It projected an audio waveform in the middle of the Fit Room.

He wiggled his gloved fingers on his right hand, taking an unusual interest in their operation. He lifted his head and looked at the soft padding stretched across the wall.

The USARIC logo stretched across the padded canvas.

He clenched his fist and turned to the projection. As he spoke, the waves rose up and down, recording his voice.

“My name is Jaycee Nayall, USARIC weapons and armory. I hope those in charge can hear what I’m about to say.”

THWACK!

Jaycee’s fist connected with the ‘U’ in USARIC. He pulled his arm away and spun his wrist three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, resetting for another hit.

“When I was drafted into the Opera Beta program I didn’t know what I was letting myself in for. If I’d known what I know now, I would never have gone.”

Jaycee lifted his fist and threw it against the padding with all his might.

SLAMM!

The plastic flaked out upon impact. The wall shuddered a second later.

“We’ve made a discovery,” Jaycee twisted his hand around and took one step back. The “S” in the logo seemed to laugh and taunt him, “We don’t know the full facts, yet. But know this. It’s a discovery far beyond anything any of us can comprehend.”

SCHLAMMM!

His punched the canvas so hard that it rocked the Fit Room.

“You can’t see this,” Jaycee moved back once again as the waveform slipped up and down, “But the noises you hear are me taking out my frustration on my employer, USARIC. One punch for every member of my crew that lost their lives. Every husband, wife, son, daughter… who are no longer around because of USARIC and their bottom line.”

THWOCK-SCHLAMM!

A furious double-punch, this time to the “A”.

“That’s for you, Maar Sheck. Two As in your name, and two extra special blows to your face. If you’re listening to this, just know that I want answers. And they’d better be *damn good*.”

Jaycee pulled his elbow back, ready to strike the “R”.

“And this one’s for Bonnie Whitaker. My friend and colleague who’s no longer around to ask you anything.”

Jaycee went to throw his fist at the canvas, when he heard a wallop coming from the other side of the door. He lowered his arm and squinted with confusion.

“Huh?”

He made his way to the door, “Stop recording.”

The audio waveform flat-lined and beeped.

“Save message?” asked the holograph.

“Yes, save and send. Now.”

* * *

Jaycee approached the crew quarters and spotted Tripp's door was wide open.

"Hey, Tripp? Are you there?"

He peered inside and saw Tripp unconscious on the floor.

"Jeez," he moved in and clocked Samantha and Rogan on the screen waiting for her husband to return to the screen. They were unaware of what had happened.

"Tripp?" she asked. "Where are you?"

Jaycee leaned into the tiny lens above the screen. The inset picture in the corner of the screen showed his face enveloped the whole square.

"Samantha?"

He crouched to the floor and slid his giant arms underneath Tripp's. It took thirty seconds to lift his passed-out friend up to his feet – and another thirty to set him down on the chair.

"Jaycee," Rogan beamed with delight, "You're alive, too."

"Nayall?" Samantha gasped. "Is that you? Where did Tripp go?"

He removed his right glove and felt Tripp's neck with his fingertips.

"He passed out. Hey, Rogan. Look at you! You've grown into a handsome, young man."

"Yes, it's been years."

"What happened, here?"

The seconds whizzed by as Jaycee adjusted his friend's head against the back of his chair. "Healy? It's okay. I think you passed out."

Samantha held up her hands, shirking responsibility, "I don't know. We were just talking and he vanished."

Jaycee stood up and pointed to Tripp, "He must have fell—" he stopped talking when he saw Charley carry their daughter in his arms.

"Samantha? Who's that behind you?"

Jaycee turned to the unconscious Tripp. Two and two slotted together in Jaycee's mind, "Oh *no*." He turned back to the screen and scowled at Samantha.

"It wasn't my fault, Jaycee. What was I supposed to do?" she sniffed, "The wait was too much."

Jaycee's heart erupted with anger.

Samantha to turned from an exquisite angel into a selfish harridan in Jaycee's eyes. It only took ninety seconds.

"God, I'm so sorry, Jaycee. The news must have broke his heart. But, please, you have to see it from my point of view—"

Jaycee scrunched his face and turned away, happy that the

woman wasn't in the room with him.

"*Bitch.*"

"—You spend close to five years without hearing a damn word," she screamed, scaring Rogan from her arms, "And then Viddy Media goes wild with speculation. Tripp and the crew disappears. No oxygen. I'm sorry. I swear to you, Jaycee, we thought you were all dead—"

KER-SMASSSSHHH!

Jaycee's fist flew through the screen. The plastic exploded around his wrist as his elbow went through the frame. Samantha's image frazzled and froze on the spot around his forearm.

He wrenched his arm out and flung away with the transparent debris. The noise slapped Tripp out of his slumber.

"Wh-what's g-going on?" Tripp yelped. He shifted in his chair and grabbed the armrests, "What happened?"

Orange sparks and a thick, black smog drifted away from the smashed screen.

"Technical problems."

"What did the screen do to you?"

"Ah," Jaycee walked to the door and did his best to change the conservation, "It looked at me the wrong way. You know my temper. What do you remember?"

Tripp blinked and stood up from the chair, recollecting what had happened, "I, uh, tried to call home. Waited ages for the connection."

"Okay. What else?"

Tripp's face lit up with joy, "I never got to say anything. But I saw my wife and son's face again."

"Did you speak to them, though?"

"No, the connection must have gone down—"

"—You didn't speak to them?" Jaycee reaffirmed, once and for all.

"No. Everything went dark."

Jaycee held Tripp's shoulder and took a deep breath, "Listen, don't try to contact home until we *get* home. Okay?"

"Okay," Tripp looked up at him with dogged, innocent eyes, "Why?"

"You trust me, don't you?"

Tripp pointed at the smashed screen, "Of course I do. But can't I just—"

"—Then just trust me on *this*, Healy. You know your family are alive and healthy. They know you're alive. That's all you need. Promise me you'll drop it."

"Okay? I promise."

"Good," Jaycee walked out of the quarters, leaving a thoroughly confused Tripp – and smoldering N-GAGE screen – in his wake.

Jaycee stormed along the walkway in a fit of rage. He thumped the walls a little too hard, “I swear to God, someone hand me USARIC on a plate and I’ll eat them for breakfast.”

He tried to calm himself down.

It was no use taking his frustration out on the ship, despite the fact that it belonged to a company that Jaycee perceived to be the enemy.

The USARIC logo angered him further.

Just thinking the Healy family revelation threatened to push him over the edge.

No sooner had Jaycee caught his breath than he heard a retching sound at the far end of the corridor.

BWUCK-BWUCK-KROITCH.

He lifted his head up and tried his luck, “Who’s there?”

No response.

The noises stopped. Jaycee knew he wasn’t hearing things.

“Ugghhhh,” came a very familiar voice, spluttering in pain, “I d-don’t feel too well.”

The voice waded down the corridor. It sounded like it belonged to Tor.

“Rabinovich? Is that you?”

Jaycee sprinted around the corner and skidded on his heels. He went for the Rez-9 on his belt, “Christ, Rabinovich. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Tor doubled-over the staircase rail and coughed up some bile.

SPLOT-SPLISH.

The pink liquid splattered against the floor a few levels down.

“Guuuuh,” Tor pushed his top half away from the railing and threw his head back, “Must have been the hyper-sleep. I really don’t feel too good.”

“Come here. Let me look at you,” Jaycee held the man’s face in his hands, “Show me your eyes.”

His thumbs pressed against Tor’s forehead and lifted his eyelids up.

Tiny streaks from Tor’s bloodshot eyes snaked across the whites of his eyes.

“You’re definitely ill. Where were you going?”

“R and R,” Tor said. “Get some water. Maybe have a lie down.”

“That’s a good idea. We need you fit for when Charlie docks with us.”

Tor hyperventilated in Jaycee’s arms and pushed himself away.

“Th-they’re c-coming to t-take us—”

Tor projectile vomited on Jaycee’s exo-suit.

“Ugh, that’s gross,” Jaycee bopped Tor on his shoulders with disgust, “*Really*?”

Tor spat a mound of pink liquid to the floor. He hugged himself and shivered up a storm, “I’m s-sorry, J-Jaycee,” he sniggered through his illness, silently happy that he’d taken some form of revenge on the man.

Jaycee didn’t spot Tor’s semi-delight, putting his puking down to a spell of extreme misfortune.

He scooped up the puke and flung it to the ground, “You know, not many people vomit on me and get away with it.”

Jaycee looked at the shuddering man buckled before him. He ran through the events of the past few days and, for the first time in their relationship, took pity on him.

“I’ll look the other way on this,” Jaycee cleared his throat and pointed at the staircase, “Be careful you don’t fall down the stairs on your way to R and R.”

“Yuh-yuh,” Tripp nodded and leaned against the railing.

GRUMBLE… BLUCK…

“Ooophhh,” Tor bent over and clutched his rumbling stomach, “Th-thanks, Jaycee.”

“I’m going to check up on Jelly and Wool. I’d stay near the bathroom if I were you.”

“That damn c-cat,” Tor grabbed the railing and staggered down the step, almost losing his footing, “She c-can’t be t-trusted, you know. She has a k-killer instinct. She’s b-bigger than us, n-now.”

Jaycee watched as Tor made his awkward and painful descent down the staircase.

He shook his head and moved away, muttering to himself, “The grass ain’t always greener, I guess.”

Medix

Space Opera Beta – Level Three

Jaycee entered Medix and saw Jelly sitting crossed-legged on her bed. Wool knelt behind her and brushed the cat’s hair with the golden comb.

“Yes, Jaycee?” Jelly waited for a reaction. “Are you getting ready to take out the trash?”

“Huh?”

Jelly smiled at him and pulled her head forward as Wool brushed her hair back.

Jaycee gripped the door frame, “Oh, sorry. I didn’t realize you

two were—”

“—What do you want?”

He covered the vomit marks on his exo-suit chest plate with his gloves.

“Just to tell you that Charlie is about to dock. Tripp wants us all ready to disembark.”

Wool watched the teeth of the comb slide through Jelly’s bountiful orange hair. Every knot that burst apart filled her with delight and distanced the stench of bile that had entered the room.

“What’s that smell?” Wool asked.

“It’s him,” Jelly flapped her tail and lifted an infinity claw at Jaycee, “He smells of sick.”

“Really?” Wool asked. “Have you been throwing up?”

“No, it wasn’t me—”

“—Can you leave us alone for a while, please,” Wool returned to Jelly’s hair.

“I’ll be on at control if you need me. Sorry, again,” Jaycee stepped into the corridor and let the door to slide shut behind him.

“Bye, Jaycee,” Jelly winked at him and wrapped her arms around her bent knees.

SCHWUMP.

The tiniest sound of the comb’s teeth racing through Jelly’s hair dispelled the otherwise silent atmosphere.

Wool closed her eyes and moved her face closer to Jelly’s head. She pressed her nose against the strands and breathed in.

“Mommy? What are you doing?”

“Be quiet a minute, honey,” Wool’s heart filled with light as Jelly’s scent engulfed her lungs.

“Mmm,” Wool felt a tingle roll down her spine. She whispered so quietly, she barely heard herself speak, “God… I love you so much. I hope you know that.”

Jelly scrunched her face, wondering what was going on behind her. Playful to a fault and still childlike in her naivety, “Are we going home soon?”

Wool waited a second to allow the last moment of wonder to escape her body, “Yes, honey.”

“Why do you keep calling me *honey*?” Jelly asked. “Is it because I’m the same color as it?”

“No, hon—uh, Jelly. It’s because you’re sweet. It’s a term of endearment.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Wool resumed combing Jelly’s hair, “Don’t worry. Our friends from USARIC will be here any moment, now. We need to look nice so

we can meet them, right?"

She removed the comb and ran her fingers along Jelly's scalp and brushed past her left ear.

"Look at me," Wool whispered.

Jelly purred and tilted her head to the side. Wool's knuckle ran through the fur on her cheek and down under her chin.

"I like it when you do my chin."

The half-cat's wonderful pupils glowed a dark orange. A mesmerizing sensation tumbled around Wool's chest like a pair of sneakers in a washing machine.

"God… look at you, Jelly Anderson," she muttered, utterly confounded by the girl's beauty, "You're so beautiful. I look into your eyes, and all I see is love."

Jelly pulled a face of naive contrition, "I don't know what to say when you say things like that."

"Then don't say anything," Wool pressed her lips on Jelly's forehead, "Don't say a word."

Jelly licked her lips as she received her kiss. She wanted an answer to a question that quickly formed in her head.

"Do you love me, mommy?" Jelly looked up at her with adorable dough-eyes.

"Yes, honey."

"Are you *in* love with me?" Jelly asked without a trace of emotion.

"God, *no*," Wool held her chest, troubled by the question, "Why would you think that?"

"Because when I was with Jamie, his mommy always said how in love with his daddy she was."

"That's not the same thing, honey."

"Why?"

"Being *in* love with someone is…" Wool found the relatively easy distinction difficult to verbalize, "It's not the same."

"Why?"

Wool arrived at the simplest explanation available, "You wouldn't want to have babies with me. Would you?"

Jelly didn't say no. She was over the prospect of sharing a child with her new mommy. Wool, on the other hand, was seriously hoping Jelly would say *no*.

"Mmm. No, I don't think so."

"Oh, thank God," Wool exhaled and clutched at her heart, "But, uh, you do *love* your chicken pâté, don't you?"

Jelly licked her lips and providing Wool with an inadvertent reminder of just how sharp her fangs were, "Mmm, chicken."

"See?" Wool smiled. "The difference between being *in* love and

love?"

Jelly shrugged her shoulders and planted her bare, furry feet on the floor.

"Not really. Sorry."

"Never mind," Wool tossed the comb on the pillow, temporarily disappointed with Jelly's innate ability to learn the essentials but flatly unable to process anything past nuance.

Jelly turned around and held the bulge in her belly, "Do you think Pink Symphony was in love with me?"

"I don't know. What makes you say that?"

The pink glow shimmied through her fur, "Because it gave me a baby."

Wool considered the statement very carefully.

Jelly had a point. No one knew how the pregnancy could have happened, but, the end result was *potentially* an act of having made love.

"That's too strange to even think about, honey. All we know is you went in the water and came back pregnant. God, just saying it loud sounds crazy."

"I never wanted a baby," Jelly lifted the bottom of the exo-suit up, "But now it's here I've changed my mind. I feel like it belongs to me. Like I have to save it from harm."

"Whatever that is inside you, we must protect it," Wool placed her palms on Jelly's baby bump, "At all costs."

"Did you have a baby? Jelly asked.

"No, sweetie. I wasn't able to have babies."

"Why not?" Jelly asked.

"It's a long story, honey. I'm not able to have babies."

"Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Wool ducked her head like a sad child, "It makes me sad."

Wool's fingertips snaked across Jelly's belly bump. The synthetic skin on the back of her hand cracked apart and spat pink gunk onto her wrist.

"Ugh, you must have nicked me with your claw, honey."

"I didn't."

The pair shared a moment. Both knew deep down inside that something wasn't quite right.

Wool shook her head and pointed at the wall by Jelly's bed, "Let's get a new measurement, honey."

"Okay."

Jelly walked backwards to the wall, "Do you miss Bonnie?"

Her question caught Wool off-guard.

"Press your shoulders against the wall," Wool squeezed the thumb

on her left hand as she marched in front of her. “Of course I miss her. Why did you ask me that?”

Jelly pressed her back to the wall and yawned. Her ears and mouth stretched across her face, inadvertently revealing her fangs and bright orange eyes.

Wool would never get over how horrific Jelly’s face looked when she yawned.

“I noticed you stopped speaking to Bonnie before we went to war,” Jelly asked. “Why?”

“I didn’t,” Wool dismissed the accusation and clocked Jelly’s height, “I didn’t feel like talking to anyone.”

She looked at the height marks on the wall beside Jelly’s leg.

3’3” – 4’6” – 5’4”

The latter recording marked chest-high to Jelly.

“You’ve grown so quickly over the past day or so,” Wool glanced at Jelly’s face, “Hold still a moment.”

“Why am I growing?” Jelly asked.

“We don’t know, honey. It’s something to do with the Symphonium.”

“Sim… fow… knee… umm…” Jelly repeated.

Wool tiptoed and pressed the fleshy part of her thumb on top of Jelly’s head. The sharp curve lit up and scored a line into the wall.

“Height reading, please,”

The mark on the wall throw a beam of soft, white light to the floor and calculated the distance.

“Seven feet exactly,” advised the thumbnail.

Wool paced back and took in Jelly’s towering height. A sickening idea popped into her mind. One that she felt couldn’t be repeated verbally.

“Is everything okay, mommy?”

Wool rubbed her face and tried to halt her emotions, “If you keep growing like this, it’s not good.”

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying,” Wool lied and sniffed away her tears. “Honey, please. You need to stop…”

Jelly didn’t know how to respond. She tried for a smile – a wry attempt to make her assumed mother happy once again, “Am I a big girl, now?”

“Yes. You *are*.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Space Opera Charlie

Alex opened his eyes. He didn't recognize where he was at first. He felt something crawl across the side of his face.

Whatever it was that touched him had an elbow attached to it. Alex ran his tongue across his lips. A thin layer of film had formed over the skin.

"Where am I? What happened?" he whispered.

"You passed out," Nutrene's reassuring tone drifted into his right ear.

He looked up the length of the arm to find the woman smiling at him. Her scary monocle tore his gaze away from her lips.

Alex felt the urge to grab his gun and defend himself, "Jesus, he tried to kill me."

"No. He didn't. Oxade was just making sure you were on-point."

"*On-point*? He accused me of espionage," Alex blurted, still reeling from the effects of escaping execution, "He sure has a funny way of making sure his crew are okay."

Her face crept over his. An undeniable heat rolled across her pupils as she stared into his eyes, "It's okay, now. We're about to board Opera Beta."

"Is it safe?"

"Perfectly."

Without warning she planted her lips on his and kissed him. He didn't fight at first due to the shock. The deeper the kiss, the more he felt the need to push her away.

Alex clamped his hands on her shoulders and extricated himself from the unwanted attention. Nutrene wouldn't stop and hoped Alex would sink into the event and enjoy it. Her palm slapped against his forehead and pinned the back of his head against his pillow.

"Nggg," he struggled and flung his head to the side. His lips yanked several ropes of saliva across his cheek.

"Hey," Nutrene's monocle twisted around and focused on his face. She grabbed his hand and thrust it against her bare midriff, "Don't you want *this*?"

"No," he shoved back and threw his legs over the side of the bed, "Get off me."

Nutrene jumped off the bed and rotated her monocle, "I guess we don't see eye to eye, then."

"Very funny," Alex stood to his feet and brushed himself down,

“Anyway, I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s her name?”

“If you must know, it’s Grace.”

“Ha,” Nutrene folded her arms in defiance. She threw her body weight onto her left leg, making *damn* sure her thigh was visible, “You know what they say about women who are named after adjectives, don’t you?”

Alex turned away, “It’s not an adjective. It’s a noun. *Graceful* would be an adject—”

“—Is she better than me?” she interrupted, taking offense at his dismissal and little interest in his ad-hoc English class.

“What is it with you, Nutrene?” Alex stood up and ran his hands through his hair, “Ever since we met you’ve been making eyes at me —”

“—That was a cheap jab.”

She turned away in a huff.

“That’s not what I meant, and you *know* it. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you’ve been looking at me. You’re meant to be focusing on the mission.”

“We spend all our time killing on behalf of the government,” she tried to win him around with a sly wink from her monocle, “Make love, not war. Right?”

“A bit of professionalism might help, here. *Nutrene*.”

“Oxade was right,” she snapped. “There’s something not quite right about you.”

“Really? How so?”

“Just the way you’re behaving. You’re not like any USARIC merc I’ve ever met. In touch with your feminine side? Acting like a little fairy, more like.”

“You’re screwed in the head. And that’s the only part of you that’s getting screwed if I have anything to do with it.”

“Funny *man*, aren’t you? *Alex Hughes*,” Nutrene bit her lip and decided she couldn’t look at him any longer, “You can’t blame a red-blooded woman pining for some human contact.”

“That’s the price you pay for dealing USARIC’s dirty work,” Alex made for the door with a steely determination to get the job done, “Don’t lecture me about right and wrong, Nutrene. You don’t know what you’re up against.”

“What’s that meant to mean?” she screamed. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Assault *them*, Nutrene. Don’t assault me,” Alex finished and left the room.

Primary Airlock

Space Opera Charlie

"No messing around. Just get on board and transmit your findings," Oxade's voice emanated through Poz's head as he rolled toward the airlock on his cylinder.

"I don't intend to mess around, Oxade."

Poz turned down the walkway and saw Neg rolling towards him, "Would you hurry up, please?"

"I'm sorry."

"Not good enough."

The front of Poz's crescent body opened up and produced a cylindrical magnet.

SPIZZZZ…

It rumbled violently and shook the air in front of it, "Come on, we're wasting time, here."

WHIZZ-SCHUNT!

The magnetic force lassoed Neg across the walkway. The side of her body slammed against his magnetic plate. He released her and spun around to the first airlock door.

"Oxade, we're here. Can you open door A?"

"Opening, now," Oxade advised.

The door slid open and allowed the pair into the chamber.

"Standby for decompression."

The Control Deck

Space Opera Charlie

Oxade and Manny watched the giant three-dimensional holographic live feed of the airlock. Poz and Neg rolled into the decompression chamber.

The first door slammed shut behind them.

"Manny will attempt communication with Beta's autopilot. The bridge will connect in sixty seconds."

"Understood," Poz said.

"Can you switch to 3-D representation, please."

A black rod crept out from Poz's scalp and fanned out into three prongs. Three transparent beams blasted around the decompression chamber.

Oxade took a few steps back as the live feed developed depth,

slinking out into a three-dimensional box.

"Very good, thank you," Oxade hit a button on the console. "Commencing decompression. Standby."

SWWIIISSHHHH.

A blast of white gas flew out of the chamber's walls and engulfed Poz and Neg. The glass-covered pressure inlet dial on the wall spun around.

"Reminds me of the last time you farted," Neg chuckled to herself through the blast.

"I don't fart."

"Guys, knock it off," Oxade said. "Taking you down to zero point five, ay-tee-em," he turned to Manny, "How's the link-up with Beta?"

"The bridging process is nearly complete," Manny shuffled around in the air. A loading bar hung in front of her cover.

Opera Beta and Opera Charlie hung side by side. Beta's white bridge rails extended toward its sister ship's airlock.

CLAMP.

Opera Charlie's bridge end latched on Opera Beta's. The two vessels connected successfully.

"Connection secure," Manny turned to Oxade, "Decompression set."

Oxade stepped into the three-dimensional image, effectively appearing alongside Poz and Neg, "Okay. Listen up. I want an atmosphere reading as soon as you're on board. Second, we need to know who's alive and, more particularly, where Anderson is."

"Understood," Neg said.

"Keep your feed transmitting at all times. Upon connection break, we will wait thirty seconds until advancement."

"Understood," Poz said. "I will keep transmitting. Twenty second responder time."

Oxade stepped out of the image and held out his arm, "Manny, proceed with disembarkation."

"Yes, Captain."

Oxade winked at the pair of bulbous droids, "Good luck, guys."

"We don't need luck," Neg chuckled and turned to the outer airlock door, "Let's go kill us some bad guys."

Primary Airlock

Space Opera Beta

Tripp checked his appearance in the airlock window. Poz and Neg

rolled in tandem across the bridge, pausing occasionally to look up at Saturn.

"Thanks so much for coming to save us," Tripp rehearsed his greeting under his breath, "Ugh, no. That sounds wrong."

He stood up straight and affected a more diligent aura.

"Welcome to Opera Beta. I'm the captain. Tripp Healy," he said. "Ugh, whatever."

Manuel appeared a few feet away and clapped his covers together, "Tripp?"

"Yes, Manuel?"

"You know those old science fiction movies?"

"Yes, what about them?"

"Sometimes the main character discovers something strange and says 'I have a bad feeling about this' to the others."

"Okay," Tripp shrugged his shoulders, "So what?"

"Well, at the risk of sounding trite, I have a *really* bad feeling about this."

"This?" Tripp turned to the droids on the bridge, "They're just canaries, Manuel. They're mostly harmless—"

"—I'm not referring to the two weird-looking *things* on the bridge," Manuel shifted closer to his captain, "It's the humans that concern me."

"What?"

"According to the USARIC database, two of the three are from USARIC's mercenary division."

"So?"

"Why would they send mercs on a rescue mission? A skeleton crew of three, plus two droids?"

"Space is a big, bad place. You know that," Tripp gave some consideration to Manuel's concern, "We've been missing for three years. You can't blame USARIC for exercising some due diligence and taking precautions. Anything could have happened to us. In fact, thinking about it, anything *did* happen to us. Who knows what effects Symphonium will have on them. The moment we get back we'll be quarantined and no doubt farmed out to pharmaceutical companies."

Manuel wasn't convinced.

"It would have been remiss of me not to have mentioned it."

"I know, and thank you," Tripp finished. "You're right to have aired your concern."

The bridge offered a superb view of Saturn. Poz and Neg couldn't help but take in the glorious wonder of the planet.

"She's one huge ball of gas," Poz quipped as he raced forward toward Opera Beta.

“Very intimidating,” Neg attempted to keep up with Poz’s pace, “It’s scary.”

Oxade’s voice rattled through their heads, “Hey, cretins. We don’t pay you to admire the view.”

“You don’t *pay* us at all.”

“That’s not the point. We’re on a time limit, here. Get moving.”

“*Soh-ree,*” Poz spat with sarcasm. He rolled forward and changed his shape into a giant metal ball, “How’s about this for *speed*?”

He whizzed along the bridge at speed, creating sparks against both sides of the railings.

“A Newton’s cradle ball?” Oxade huffed, none-too-impressed. “Poz, you’re not beyond dispensation, you know. I’ll active your little nuclear setting and blast your shiny butt into the next multiverse if you’re not careful.”

“Neg is slowing me down,” Poz shifted back to his regular shape and fanned out his cylindrical magnet. He kept his eyebulbs focused on the bridge floor at it whizzed under his frame.

“I am *not* slowing you down,” Neg yelped as the magnetic pull made her entire body soar towards Poz.

SWISH-SCHLAMM…

Her curved frame slapped against Poz’s, enabling him to carry her the remainder of the way to Opera Beta.

“Stop doing that,” she complained.

“Stop crawling like a snail, then,” Poz lowered his volume, “We don’t want to anger Oxade,” he upped his volume and spoke up the length of the bridge, “Advising an ETA of thirty seconds.”

“Understood. I’ll have Manny access Beta’s Manuel and activate the airlock.”

“Awaiting Beta’s airlock hatch to allow us in.”

Poz rolled up to the door and extended two sensors from his neck joint. His spindly rope-like arm retracted into his body, “Look, that must be Beta’s captain.”

Poz moved to the left and clanged against the bridge railing as he focused through the window of the outer airlock door. Tripp stared at him from behind the inner airlock hatch window.

“Handsome man,” Neg bounced up and down on the spot which caused the bridge to rattle back and forth.

“Don’t do that, you’ll get us killed,” Poz said.

“Sorry, I’m just super excited.”

“We’re not here to make friends. We’re here to get what we need and get out with the minimum of fuss.”

SWISHHHH.

The outer airlock door opened, allowing Poz and Neg to roll

inside. The door scissored down and sealed them in the chamber.

"Opera Charlie, be advised. We have boarded Beta."

"Good, now find what we need. Remember, keep it friendly."

A blast of white gas enveloped them, bringing the pressure back to a habitable consistency.

"Shh," Poz stared at Tripp's face through the glass shield on the inner door, "He's looking at us."

"He's cute," Neg beeped.

Tripp grabbed the airlock hatch lever and prepared to open the door, "I'm going manual on this."

"Fair enough," Manuel pushed himself back and opened himself out, "When you're ready."

"Here we go," Tripp yanked the lever down forcing the hatch to slide up. He looked at the two futuristic ball-shaped androids in front of him.

"Welcome to Space Opera Beta."

"Hey. I'm Poz. She's Neg."

He rolled past Tripp's thigh and surveyed the dark surroundings, "Nice place you have here."

Neg moved over to Tripp and spun her bulbous 'head', "You must be Tripp Healy?"

"I am. Very nice to meet you," Tripp held out his hand. She looked at it and drew a confused look across her surface, "That's your hand."

"Yes? I know."

"Why are you doing that, Tripp Healy?" Neg asked.

He relaxed the muscles in his palm.

"It's customary to shake hands with friends."

"Oh, we're not your friends," she squealed, softly, "We're here to make sure everything is *as it should be*."

Tripp folded his arms and gave as good as he got, "Did you sue him?"

"Sue who?"

"The moron who installed your charm chip?"

Neg frowned and twisted away from Tripp in defiance, "That's not funny—"

"—Hey, Neg. Check this out," Poz bounded down the corridor and twisted his head one-hundred-and-eighty degrees on his neck, "This spacecraft is *nasty*."

"What do you mean *nasty*—"

"—Tripp Healy," Poz interrupted, "We need to check out the control deck. Our Captain wants a full sit-rep of Opera Beta."

"Uh, sure?"

Tripp frowned at Poz and Neg's faux charm and insistence on making themselves at home, "I can fill you in, if you like?"

"No point," Poz rolled forward and extended his sensors, "Oxade? Do you read me?"

"Yes, Poz. Please advise."

"Atmosphere levels are fit for human consumption. Which is more than can be said for her decor. Oxygen set at twenty-one percent. Gas readings remain steady."

"Good. That suits us just fine," Oxade's voice chirped into Poz and Neg's head.

Tripp grew weary of the behavior of his guests. Worse, he had no idea who Poz was talking to.

"Who are you speaking with—"

"—But I'm also picking up a strange, unknown element," Poz's eyebulbs glowed as he scanned the walls, "Possibly a carcinogen of some description. It's off the charts."

Tripp held out his hand, "I can explain what that is. You see, we've just returned from a place called Pink—"

"—Tripp Healy," Poz rolled to a stop and retracted his sensors, "How have you and the crew been able to sustain yourselves with such a high toxicity level? I'm surprised your lungs haven't burst."

"Well, technically, we *haven't*. It's complicated. I don't know if you were briefed before you left. Every crew member Beta, bar one, is a Series Three Androgyne."

"Bar one?" Neg asked.

"Jelly Anderson."

"Oh, yeah. That stupid little ball of fluff. I forgot."

"Yes, everyone else is a Series Three unit. I'm one, too."

"You're *one-two*?" Poz spat with confusion, "A previous series I don't know about?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"—Oh, I *get it*. He means *he's* a series three unit, *as well*," Neg turned to Manuel, who flapped above her head like a drug-addled bird, "Who the hell is *this*?"

Manuel shuffled forward feeling his temper draw to a close, "Hello. I'm Manuel. The autopilot."

"Huh," she snorted with a metallic whiff, "An old model, right?"

"We've been away for five years. I figured USARIC might have made a few updates in the meantime."

"Hah. Well, you'll get to meet Manny soon enough."

"Manny?" Manuel asked and tried to suppress his displeasure at the revelation of his inferiority.

"Manuel-2," Neg squealed. "She doesn't take any crap from anyone. Not least previous models, like you."

Manuel folded his pages, indicating his hurt feelings, “I’m sorry. Have I done something to upset you, Neg?”

“*You*? Upset me?” Neg blew a recording of a raspberry at him, “You’re not capable of arousing any emotion in *me*, my friend.”

“Oh,” Manuel slumped in the air and huffed.

Neg darted along the walkway and caught up with Poz, “They’re seriously out of date.”

“Yes, and out-of-touch, too. It doesn’t make sense. Opera Beta is spectacularly unfit for human habitation. There’s a virus of some description present. Nothing I’ve ever encountered, anyway.”

Tripp paced along the walkway and turned to Manuel in confidence, “Have you ever met anyone *so* rude?”

“Which one are you referring to?”

“Either of them,” Tripp huffed. “Acting like they own the place.”

“Hey, Tripp Healy,” Poz reached the staircase and scanned the first step, “*Stairs*? Really?”

“Ah, yes. Problem?”

Poz butted his circular stomach against the first step, “Look at the state of this. For God’s sake.”

“*Oh, great*,” Tripp huffed and shook his head, “The two of you have mastered nuance and sarcasm, but not stairs?”

“Stairs are for idiots.”

Tripp ignored the comment, “No problem. We’ll just take the elevator.”

“Thank God for that,” Poz whistled with relief, “I’m surprised you guys know about the invention of *fire*, considering the antiquated nature of this useless spacecraft.”

Tripp snorted with sarcasm and went to touch Poz,“I see Manning/Synapse haven’t quite mastered applying manners to their new products.”

He felt an unusual stinging sensation in his palm a mere inch away from his surface.

“Don’t touch me or I’ll kill you,” Poz beeped with unease.

“I’m sorry? Are you threatening me?”

“I’m not threatening you. It’s a fact,” Poz said. “If your hand connects with me, you’ll be killed. I am a death droid.”

Neg swiveled around and hopped on the spot, “We seriously advise you not to touch us. Your skin gets absorbed and… well, let’s just say it gets very messy. We don’t care. It doesn’t affect us. We just melt your carcass and collect the data in your memory. Or your brain, if you’re a human. Which you’re not. Are you?”

“No, I’m not,” Tripp held his hands together, thankful that he hadn’t *quite* made physical contact with Poz, “And thanks for the heads up,”

“You’re welcome, big boy,” Neg tilted her head and flashed her blue eyebulbs, “Although…?”

Tripp stared at her, waiting for the rest of her sentence, “What?”

“Maybe when we return home, I’ll switch my absorption processor off and we can make sweet, sweet love—”

“—Neg,” Poz slammed his body against the bottom step in a fit of rage, “What did we agree? You don’t flirt with the normal people.”

“Hey, don’t appendage-block me!”

“Less of it, you dirty metal testicle,” Poz spat and swiveled around and tilted his ‘head’ up at Tripp, “I’m sorry about that, Tripp Healy. Neg took a bit of a knock to her processor when we were put together,” he finished with a sarcastic whisper, “Forgot to fit her with a decency chip, if I’m being honest.”

“I heard that,” Neg spun around and harrumphed.

Tripp cleared his throat and pointed to the elevator, “So, the elevator is over here, guys.”

The Control Deck

Space Opera Charlie

Oxade paced back and forth around the three-dimensional holograph live feed. He slipped himself between Poz and Neg and pointed at the sharp end of the ship.

“Show me Beta’s control deck,” he said. “I want a live display.”

“Understood,” Poz said.

“And Poz?” Oxade watched a fully kitted-out Alex and Nutrene enter the room and gave them the thumbs up.

“Yes?”

“Confirm the coordinates with their autopilot. Absorb them into your data field, please. I want every black box equivalent of their time away from Earth. Search every nook and cranny. Leave no stone unturned.”

“Do you know how long that will take?”

“No,” he said, suddenly concerned, “How long?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

Oxade breathed a sigh of relief, “Well, that’s good. Gives us enough time to take care of business. Now shut up and get working.”

He stepped out of the holograph and snapped his fingers, “Hughes.”

“Yes, Captain?”

“You and Nutrene will board Opera Beta.”

“Understood.”

“Poz and Neg are reporting high toxicity levels. You’ll have to strap your space skins on and keep a consistent check on your oxygen.”

Nutrene watched Tripp and Manuel walk behind Poz and Neg at Beta’s communications panel.

“Look at the *state* of Opera Beta,” she pointed at the windshield, “It’s cracked to all hell. Look.”

“The windshield will have sealed itself if it sustained any damage. A failsafe designed to buy the crew some time in the event of a disaster.”

“Captain?” Neg’s voice flew around the room, “Are you seeing what we’re seeing? Look at this.”

“Come in, Neg,” Oxade stepped back into the holograph, “Can you focus on the points of interest, please?”

“Yes.”

Purple light formed around the damaged flight panel.

“The main control unit is devastated,” Neg said. “In addition, the communications panel is barely operational. Beta herself is barely operational.”

“Neg, make sure Poz absorbs every piece of data available.”

“I will.”

Oxade turned to Nutrene and Alex, “Okay, that’s decided, then. We’re using Charlie to get back home. I don’t know what happened to Beta, but she’s battered beyond salvation. I wouldn’t trust her any more than I’d trust you alone with Hughes.”

Alex tried not to giggle at Oxade’s prescience.

“Did you have to say that?” Nutrene blurted. “That wasn’t nice.”

“You want nice?” he stormed up to her, face-to-face and held his palm open, “Maybe a physical reminder of who’s in charge, here?”

“Are you going to hit me?” Nutrene stared him down, “Then be a man and *hit me*.”

Oxade slapped her across the face. Her chin twisted over her right shoulder as a blotch of red heat formed over her cheek.

“Speak back to me again, Byford. I will leave you on Beta with Poz and Neg so they can detonate with you. Spread your organs around the solar system like some kind of worthless, spinster milkshake. Is that quite clear?”

She looked him in the eyes more determined than ever for blood, “Yes. *Captain.*”

Alex gulped and hoped Oxade wouldn’t deal the same talking-to as he did to Nutrene.

His luck had run out.

“What the hell are you looking at, Hughes?”

“Nothing, Captain.”

“Hey, *you.* Hughes,” Oxade stood in front of the lad and pushed his chin up with his knuckle, “Prove to me you’re on-point and on our side.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re gonna board Beta, right?”

“Yes,” Alex said with anger.

“And you’re going to kill those bastards, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Alex lied to his face with great vigor, “I’m gonna kill ‘em. I’m gonna kill ‘em all.”

Oxade grinned and thumped him on the shoulder, “That’s my boy.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Medix

Space Opera Beta – Level Three

Jelly sat on the edge of the bed nearest the door. Her original cat-sized trolley was much too small for her by now.

Wool ran the tip of her lit thumb along the wall and recorded Jelly's latest measurement.

"Before we left Pink Symphony you were just over five feet tall," Wool pressed her palm onto her thumbnail and stood to her feet in order to reach the new recorded height above her head. "Now, you're seven feet *and two inches*."

"What's happening to me, mommy?" Jelly whined in her deep and husky adult voice, "Why am I getting bigger?"

Wool shot the cat-woman a wistful look, "I don't know, honey."

"Hey, Jelly. Are you decent?"

She was anything but decent if she'd have been one hundred percent human woman. Her fur provided the modesty she needed, given the circumstances.

"Yeah."

Jaycee walked into Medix carrying a spare exo-suit and laid them on the nearest available bed, "Got you some fresh clothes. It's okay. I'm not looking."

"You can look," Jelly hopped to her feet and swished her tail around.

Jaycee took her advice and took in her enormity, "Jesus Christ on a pogo stick," he stammered and glanced at Wool, "Has she gotten *bigger* in the past few minutes, or what?"

"She won't stop growing," Wool watched Jelly throw the Kevlar exo-suit over her shoulders. She pulled the cord from the lapel, enabling it to soak around her chest, arms and abdomen.

"I like this," Jelly said with her back facing the other two.

"Does it fit okay?"

"Yeah."

She lifted her right leg and placed her foot on the bed, forming a statuesque right angle which inadvertently revealed her impressive thighs.

Wool held Jaycee back and took a step forward, "Honey? Are you okay?"

“I said I’m fine.”

The subtle croaking in her voice indicated otherwise. She tried her best to keep her cries to herself.

Wool turned around and caught a pink tear welling in her eye with her knuckle. She afforded Jelly some privacy and grabbed the exo-suit leggings, “I’ll cut a hole open for your tail.”

“No, give me it. You don’t know where the hole will be, yet,” Jelly cleared her throat and grabbed the waistline with her large paws, “Careful, don’t touch my claws.”

“Okay, okay,” Wool joined Jaycee and watched Jelly yank the fabric out into a thin, Kevlar belt. She wrapped it around her hips, accentuating the muscles in her thigh.

Jaycee’s hands shook at Jelly’s magnificence. He felt a sensation he was rarely used to. Standing before him was a woman who was his equal – or as damn near as could possibly be.

A beautiful, striking creature.

His eyes followed the fabric unravel down, away from her waist and down her thighs to her knees.

Wool cast a wry eye at Jaycee’s face. She knew what he was feeling, and didn’t approve.

“Jaycee—”

He half-heard her as he ogled Jelly’s legs.

“*Jaycee*. You’re not serious, are you?”

“Wha—?”

The fabric crept around her shin and soaked into her fur. She looked up in some discomfort and looked at Jaycee.

His eyes traveled from her waist, past her subtle baby bump, past her well-endowed chest – accentuated all the more by the tight top – and, finally, to her neck and face.

Both sets of eyes met quite by accident.

“What are you looking at?” Jelly stomped right foot to the ground and brushed her tail, “Were you *checking me out*?”

“No, no, I—”

“—You *were* checking me out, weren’t you?” Jelly hissed at him.

Wool buried her head in her hand, “Oh, God, don’t do that. You’ll make it worse.”

Jaycee’s tongue hung out of his mouth. He didn’t realize it at first, but short of having a neon love heart strapped to his head, anyone could tell he was smitten.

“I love it when you hiss at me,” he said.

BOP.

Jelly booted the bed off its wheels. She spread her claws out and poised to attack the man, “What the *hell* did you just say?”

“Nothing. I didn’t mean—”

"—Do you want me to kill you?"

Jaycee looked at his feet and apologized, "No, I didn't mean anything by it."

"God help me," she scowled in pain and clutched her stomach. The pink shimmer of light from her abdomen pounded through the suit, "I think I'm gonna be sick."

She staggered forward and slammed her paw against the wall. A spider web of cracks shot across the wall and coughed out a plume of dust.

"Guuuh," she cowed and doubled-over, trying not to be sick.

Wool's hands shook. The reality of Jelly's predicament had major repercussions for the safety of the ship and its crew.

"Honey, you're getting worse."

Jelly lifted her head and widened her ashen eyes.

"I'm not g-getting worse," she growled, "I'm g-getting *better*."

She held herself against the wall and exhaled, blowing the dust from the cracks created by her claws, "Miew," she whined, "My tail. Cut me open."

Wool raced forward and placed her hands on Jelly's hips, "Where? Tell me."

"Right… h-here…" she tapped her infinity claw at the base of her spine, "Where it usually is."

Jaycee's forearm buzzed to life and tore his attention away from the bizarre spectacle. He rolled up his sleeve and thumbed the ink toward his wrist, "This is Jaycee?"

"Jaycee," Tripp's voice came from the pinpricks in his wrist, "This is Tripp."

"I read you, Tripp. Hang on, why are you whispering?"

"We've docked with Charlie. They're performing an audit and getting ready to take us home—"

"—Mee*oowwww*," Jelly whined.

"Hold still," Wool ran her hot thumbnail ten inches down the back of Jelly's Kevlar leggings, "Nearly there."

"What's that noise?"

Jaycee lifted his wrist to his mouth, "You're never gonna believe this."

"What?"

"Anderson. She's getting *bigger*. We're trying to fit her with my back-up exo-gear."

Tripp ignored the comment, "Never mind that now. I need you to come and make yourself known to Charlie. They've sent these bizarre little droids on board but the actual crew haven't docked yet. Getting kinda spooked, here, if I'm honest."

"On it," Jaycee palmed the panel on the wall and opened the

door, “Gotta love you and leave you, now. We’ve docked with Charlie and Tripp needs me on the deck.”

“What?”

Jelly’s tail whipped out of the hole and accidentally slapped Wool across the face.

“Oww,” Wool cupped her cheek in her hands, “Jelly!”

“Sorry, mommy.”

Jaycee sniggered and shook his head, “I’ll leave you two to it. Leave your Individimedia on, Wool. We might need you.”

“Ugh,” she spat a tuft of fur from her mouth, “*Fine*. Just get us home, will you?”

Wool patted Jelly’s paw away from her shoulder, “*Please*. Be careful with your tail. You’re not a little pet anymore.”

“I said I was sorry,” Jelly began to purr and made a cute face of contrition at her ‘mother’, “*Sorry*.”

Wool squinted at her face and lifted her hand away. Her eyes suggested she was lying.

“You’re not sorry, are you?”

“No.”

“Well, if there’s one thing you’ve learned then it’s to lie convincingly.”

“Lying is fun,” Jelly chuckled. “I didn’t mean a word I said.”

Wool stepped through the open door and glanced at the window, “You’re getting weirder as well as bigger.”

Jelly stepped after her, “Mommy, wait for me.”

Wool focused on Saturn’s rings and raised her eyebrows, “Huh, that’s funny.”

“What, mommy?”

“The rings. It looks like Saturn is wearing a Decapidisc,” she shook her head and walked out of the room. “Speaking of which, where’s Tor?”

Rest & Recuperation

Space Opera Beta – Level Two

A jolly muzak version of *Swan Lake* played in the gents bathroom.

Tor sat in the first of five cubicles with his pants around his ankles. He grabbed the rail with his left hand and clenched his bowels.

“Uggghhh…” his heels squeaked along the tiled floor, “Ohhh, *no*. I think I’m gonna pass out.”

It looked as if he’d been swimming – the sweat smothered his face like a wet cloth. The veins in his temple bulged through his skin as he

took a deep breath and squeezed once again.

Then, his left forearm beeped.

"Huh?"

The ink swirled around into three, long lines, waiting to be answered: Tripp Healy.

"Ah, God. Not *now*… "

Tor rolled his shoulders, cleared his throat and relaxed his muscles. He squelched the ink to his wrist with his shaking index finger.

"Tripp?"

"Tor?"

"What is it? I'm kinda busy right now," he winced in pain. "Can it wait a couple minutes?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm *busy*."

Tripp's huffs of displeasure waded from Tor's wrist, "Look, we've docked with Charlie. You're meant to be liaising with them."

"I'm…" Tor groaned through his turmoil, "Not ready, y-yet…"

"Are you in the Fit Room?"

"No," Tor burst into tears and drooled from his mouth, "I'll be there soon. Just w-wait for m-me-*oh-Christ-alive*—"

"—Tor? I didn't catch—"

He swiped the ink away from his wrist and slammed both hands on the sides of the toilet bowl.

BLOICK-CRUNK!

Something beyond evil occurred inside his abdomen. He kicked his feet apart and tore the waistline of his inner-suit legging apart with his ankles.

"Gaaoooooowww…," he squeezed his eyes shut and tore the plastic off the toilet seat. A final squeeze of his stomach muscles was all it took.

Tor's eyes bulged out of their sockets. A blood vessel burst in his forehead.

SCH-JUNTT-SPLASH.

Then, an intense wave of relief smothered his very being. He'd released whatever had been causing the turmoil into the bowl.

"Ohhhh," he cried pink tears with insane joy, "Thank *God.*"

He looked at the toilet paper dispenser and found that it was empty.

"Damn it," He brushed the empty cardboard tube and muttered to himself, "Does no one replenish the facilities anymore?"

Against his better judgment, and with little option to improvise, he removed his left boot, rolled his sock off his foot and held it up for inspection.

"Farewell, my friend."

Thirty-Eight Seconds Later…

Tor dropped the used sock between his legs and into the toilet bowl. He bent over, grabbed his inner-suit pants and pulled them up his legs.

The pain in his back had gone, too, much to his surprise. All in all, a very worthwhile trip to the convenience.

"A comfort break like no other," he smiled with relief and went for the flush. His face fell when he saw the contents of the bowl.

"Eh? What the *hell*…?"

A fleshy arm the size of a toilet brush wriggled around in the water, thrashing for dear life.

SCHWIPP!

A talon swung out from the end and scratched at the porcelain, trying to climb out.

Tor gasped and slammed the toilet seat shut – right on the end of the limb. It squealed and kicked its talon around in pain.

GROWLLL.

Tor buckled over in pain and clutched his stomach, "Ooof," He could feel something wagging from his behind. He squeezed his stomach muscles and put a stop to the commotion.

"Nuuuhh," he squealed, "What's h-happening to m-me?"

CREEAAAKKK!

The material on his right shoulder snapped apart, pushing the skin and joints through the sleeve. "Oh my God, Nooo—"

KEERRAAATTTCH!

His arm burst apart, splattering the cubicle walls with pink goo. The sleeve tore off and slopped to the flooded ground.

"Aggghhhh"

A Shanta limb unfurled from the socket in his shoulder and swished out its talon.

"Sha…sha…" Tor's head shook around. His mouth flung a rope of pink gloop into the air. "Shaaaaantaaaaa—"

Thinking fast on his feet – and then his knees – he lifted the toilet seat up, scooped the dead limb from the water and lifted it in the air.

"Sha… shaaaaan…"

He gargled through his tears and hacksawed at his shoulder with the talon. The large limb squealed and flailed around as he hacksawed the Symphonium-laced talon across his upper forearm.

The razor-sharp edge punctured through the grotesque right Shanta arm.

HACK-HACK-SLASH!

"Ngggggg," he dropped the spent limb to the floor and slammed the toilet lid down on his newly-formed wrist. He planted his boots on the wall and tore himself away from his mutated arm, all the while keeping his weight pressed down on the lid.

"Gaaaaaah," the arm tore away from his shoulder socket and writhed around in pain.

He slammed the lid down, trapping the vicious limb inside the bowl. The sound of talon-on-porcelain scratched and squealed from inside.

"Take th-that, you Shaa-aaanta s-scumbag."

SLAMM-GROOWWLLSSCCHHH!

He hit the flush handle, slammed his palm on his right shoulder's stump and kicked the cubicle door open.

The Bridge

Alex and Nutrene pulled themselves along the weightless metal gantry.

Alex spoke into his headgear microphone, "These outer-suits are kinda funky."

Nutrene burst out laughing when she caught sight of his USARIC-issued helmet skin. The thick, wet protective membrane looked like his face was melting.

"You look like a waxwork that's been left in the sun for five hours," Nutrene said before realizing she must have looked the same.

"Touché, Nutrene."

A rocketing sound occurred above their heads, forcing Saturn's light away from them.

Alex lifted his head to inspect the source of the noise. A giant fireball the size of Enceladus moved towards Saturn at a snail-like pace.

"What's going on up there?"

"Is that Enceladus?" Nutrene's voice came through Alex's headgear.

"It must be."

"What's she doing?"

"How should I know?"

Alex grabbed the bridge railing and yanked himself further along. The front of his boot drifted a couple of inches from the grille, "I don't want to hang around to find out."

Oxade's voice chimed in with disdain, "When you two lovebirds are quite finished enjoying the view, do you think you could get on

Beta and take what's ours, please?"

"We are, we are. But we think you should see this," A pang of nerves socked Nutrene in the stomach.

"What is it?"

"Do you have a feed of Saturn and Enceladus?"

"No, but I can get one. Why, what's wrong?"

"The moon. Well, one of them, anyway. It's a fireball, like a raging inferno," Nutrene widened her eyes and took in the scale of the spectacle, "It's *fantastic*."

"Never mind that now. I've advised Beta team that you are en route. Go in, take the data download package from Poz, and get the hell out of there."

"Oh, uh… yes, of course," Nutrene just about managed to tear her eyes away from Enceladus and focus on Opera Beta's outer airlock hatch.

"Nutrene? Come on," Alex waved her over. "Let's go."

"I'm coming…" she took one, final glance at the giant inferno rocketing towards Saturn.

The Control Deck

Space Opera Beta – Level One

Neg watched Poz retrieve Beta's data from the communications console via his arm extension.

"Seven minutes until data transfer is complete," he advised to anyone listening.

Tripp watched the process take place with Jaycee. The pair were mesmerized by the technology on display.

"So, this is what the future looks like?" Jaycee whispered. "Manning/Synapse ditches the human look and goes with a tin of beans?"

Tor stumbled into the room looking for all the world like a shivering, bag of sweating nerves with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Tripp, Jaycee, Manuel, Poz, Neg, and Jaycee turned around to see who produced the wretched gurgling.

"Tor," Tripp yelled, "Where have you been?"

"S-Something's happening to me, I'm s-sick," he grumbled through his mouthful of saliva, "M-My organs feel so c-c-cold…"

"Who's this?" Poz asked, flippantly.

"Oh, this is Tor Klyce. Our sort of communications officer," Tripp clapped eyes on the sweating man properly, "My God, Klyce. Pull yourself together."

“I’ll b-be okay,” Tor’s doubled-over and almost vomited on the floor.

Poz knocked the swivel chair over to him, “Here, have a seat.”

“Th-thanks.”

Tor staggered across the control deck and turned around, thumping his behind onto the chair, “Owww.”

“What happened to you?” Jaycee reached into his belt, preparing himself to blow the man’s head off.

“I’ll be okay. I think I’ve caught some kind of space flu, or something,” Tor lied. He needed to keep his mutation a secret from the others, or else he was dead.

“Ah, that explains it,” Poz rolled his head around and blink his eyebulbs, “The flu? Whatever it is pervading the atmosphere on this ship has clearly gotten to him.”

“What do you mean?” Tripp spat. “*Flu*? Pervaded the atmosphere?”

“Captain Healy, your ship is infected with whatever this pink gas is. If it’s even a gas, of course.”

“Bleuurrgggghhh…” Tor pressed his only arm to his knee and spat a rope of pink drool to the ground.

Tripp noticed Tor didn’t have a right arm now that he’d uncovered the stump, “Holy hell, Tor. Where’s your arm?”

“I had to remove it. It malfunctioned.”

“Malfunctioned?”

“Where is it now?” Jaycee asked. “Don’t lie to me, Russian. Where did you leave it?”

“Why-why d-do you c-care?”

“When Baldron took my hand it fell to the floor and tried to attack him. It ran out of battery and flipped him the bird. You can’t leave Androgyne parts lying around—”

“—It’s o-okay, I took c-care of it.”

“Russian, huh?” Neg tucked the side of her head onto her cylinder ‘shoulder’ area and scanned Tor’s face.

“Wh-what are you looking at?” Tor wiped the drool from his lips and complained to Tor, “Why is she looking at me?”

“I dunno. It’s better than her making eyes at me for a change.”

Tor spat another mound of pink phlegm to the floor, “You do all realize that there’s a giant cat on the loose who’s—”

“—Oh. I know you,” Neg beamed and cut off Tor’s note of caution, “Viktor Rabinovich.”

The sick man sat back in his chair, dumbstruck, “How do you know my name?”

“Dummy,” Neg giggled in her childlike electronic voice, “Everyone *knows* you. You were assassinated five years ago. But, here

you are, alive and well. Tut-tut. Bad man."

"This is *asinine*," Tor tried to jump out of his seat and accost the rude droid, but slumped back to his seat in pain.

"Four minutes remaining till the transfer is complete," Poz's head spun around to Neg and Tripp, "Okay, enough bum-fondling from you two, please. I gather we have visitors at the airlock."

"That is correct," Manuel bent his back cover toward the door, "Tripp? Would you like me to meet and greet our guests from Opera Charlie?"

"Yes, and take Jaycee with you."

Jaycee needed someone to take out his frustration on, and so thumped Tor on the back, "Do I look like a doorman?"

Tripp looked him up and down. That Kevlar suit. His large frame, and booming voice.

"Actually, *yes*."

"Fair enough."

"Stop being insubordinate and go with Manuel. Remember who's your Captain, here."

"Fine," He stomped toward the door in a huff and clenched his fist as he walked past Tor.

"N-No, d-don't hit me! I'm sick—"

"—You got that right," Jaycee lifted his fist and threatened to clobber the man.

"No, no, please—"

THWOMP.

Jaycee slammed Tor on the back of his neck with his new 'Baldron hand' and continued to the door, "Landaker says hello, *dickhead*."

Manuel slumped in the air and shook his covers in disapproval, "Jaycee?"

"What?"

"That was unnecessary."

"*You're* unnecessary, my encyclopedic friend," Jaycee palmed the panel on the wall. The door opened and allowed him out, "Are you coming or what?"

"Very well."

As the pair left, Tripp, Poz, and Neg discovered they had front row seats to the unveiling of Tor's breakfast.

"Bloooarrggghhh—"

SCHPLA-AA-TT.

Chunks of spew splattered around his feet. The pink gunk ran across the floor and down the nearest grate.

"Oh, that's just *gross*," the three of them complained. They turned away and pinched their nostrils shut.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Primary Airlock

Space Opera Beta

Jaycee watched Alex and Nutrene enter Opera Beta's airlock. He tapped the window and held his thumb up at them, "Ready?"

Both of them nodded and held their thumbs up at him.

"Okay," Jaycee said to Manuel, "Let's decompress and get them in."

"Good idea," Manuel said.

"Here we go," Jaycee yanked the level down and eyed the pressure inlet on the wall. The dial spun to the left, indicating the pressure drop.

SPRIIISSSHHHH!

A cloud of white gas burst around Alex and Nutrene. The inner airlock door flew up and offered the pair onto the ship.

"Hey, team Charlie," Jaycee stood aside and thumped his chest plate, "I'm Jaycee Nayall, Weapons and Armory. This, here, is our autopilot."

"Thank you so much for coming to rescue us," Manuel said.

Alex went to peel off his mask.

"You might want to keep that on, by the way," Jaycee said. "We don't want you getting sick."

"Right," Alex loosened his grip and made his way out of the airlock, "I heard you guys encountered some alien entity. Is it really that bad?"

"Your robot droid *thing* says Beta is thoroughly infected," Jaycee said.

"Poz and Neg?" Nutrene smirked. "They're a handful, aren't they?"

"They're certainly not on nodding terms with manners, I'll give them that. The virus isn't affecting us Androgynes, but the same can't be said for you humans."

Nutrene exited the inner airlock door. It sliced shut like a guillotine behind her, "Where have you been all this time?"

"I'd rather my Captain fill you in on the details."

"We need to know everyone's coordinates," Alex said. "Where's Anderson?"

"I think she's resting in Medix."

"Medix?"

"Yes, level three."

"Level three?" Alex raised an eyebrow at Nutrene, "Take us to your captain, please. Let's get you guys out of—" he stopped talking and clamped eyes on the floating Manuel, "Are you the autopilot?"

"Indeed I am, yes. I'm Manuel. Very nice to meet you both."

"You too. Where is Captain Tripp Healy?"

"Just this way," Manuel turned around and fluttered up the walkway, "He's at the control deck…"

Tor slammed his left hand on the communications panel and dry-heaved. The sweat on his face turned to a fine jelly. He fell to his knees, seriously worse for wear.

"Guuuh," his mouth began to foam, "Shaaaa…"

Tripp looked over from the flight deck and immediately raced over to him, intending to help the man to his feet, "Jesus, Tor. What's wrong with you?"

"I n-need to t-tell you something."

Tripp hooked his arms under Tor's one remaining armpit and helped him to his feet, "What is it?"

"I'm d-dying."

"Ha. And not for the first time," Poz blurted, concentrating on the up-link from the console.

"Dying?" Tripp analyzed the man's face. His eyes were beyond bloodshot. Snot and fluids poured from his ears and nose, "Look at me."

"Oh-oh *k-kay*."

Tor's pupils wound around and turned a murky, urine-color.

"My God. Tor, you're *really* sick."

"I've b-been t-trying to t-tell y-you."

SWISH.

"Hey, you two," Jaycee shouted at the pair as he walked into the control deck with Manuel, Alex and Nutrene behind him, "Get a room, for heaven's sake."

Tripp kept Tor upright, "Jaycee, look at him. He needs urgent medical attention."

"Where's Wool?"

"Still at Medix, I think," Jaycee looked at Alex and Nutrene, "Sorry about this, guys. Our Russian traitor, here, is feeling a bit—"

"—Viktor Rabinovich?" Alex eyed Tor with keen interest.

Tor slid behind Tripp, using him as a body shield.

Jaycee went for his Rez-9, "Huh? Tor, what are you—"

Alex threw his left arm out like a Samurai sword.

SCHUNT.

The Rez-9 flew into his palm. He swung his arm to Tor and threatened to shoot him, “Viktor Rabinovich.”

“Yes,” Tor removed the Rez-9 from Tripp’s belt and thrust the barrel against his temple, “Stay back or I’ll blow his head off.”

A three-way standoff occurred.

Tor held Tripp’s gun at his temple. Alex kept his firearm pointed at Tor’s forehead.

Jaycee swung his Rez-9 from Alex to Tor, and then back at Alex, “Hey, what’s going on?”

Nutrene held out her hands, desperate to put a halt to the forthcoming violence.

“Guys, please? Can we work this out?”

Alex took a step closer to Tor, who hid behind Tripp’s body, “You’re meant to be dead—”

“—I *am* d-dead,” Tor screamed back, “Don’t come any closer or I’ll blow this bastard’s memory banks out all over this place.”

“Drop your weapon, Rabinovich,” Alex threatened. “Do it.”

“What’s this about?” Tripp muttered, keeping his arms outstretched.

“Th-that s-sonofabitch Alex Hughes,” Tor thumbed the side of the Rez-9 and armed it, “He t-tried to assassinate m-me—”

“—Why?”

“B-Because, h-he works f-for—” Tor grunted and growled. The barrel slipped away from Tripp’s temple and launched into the air.

Alex took another step forward and prepared to blast Tor’s forehead apart, “Rabinovich, get on your knees—”

SCHPLATTT-GROOWWWLLL!

Tor’s chest catapulted into the air, taking his mechanical body with it. His one remaining arm cracked apart and released a fleshy Shanta limb.

SCHTOMP-CRAACK.

The limb smashed its talon to the ground, shaking everyone across the ground like a tray of marbles.

“Wuh-wuh,” Alex ran to the other end of the wall, “What’s happening to him?”

Tripp scooped his Rez-9 from the floor and swung it at Tor – or, what little remained of him, “He’s changing into one of those things.”

“What *things—?”*

SPATCH-CREAK-SLAMM.

Four Shanta limbs burst from Tor’s sides and slammed to the floor. The talons dug against the ground and produced a whirlwind of electric sparks. The synthetic skin over his neck pulled apart and tossed his head to the floor.

A messy fusion of creature limbs and Tor’s devastated top half

staggered toward the door, squealing and growling all the way.

"Get behind something," Nutrene screamed through her mask and dived behind the flight deck.

"Help m-me…" Tor's head hung by a thread of synthetic skin down the back of the Shanta, "I n-need help."

"Open fire."

BAM-BAM-BAM!

Tor's bottom half ran out of the control deck, carrying its six half-formed limbs with it.

"God damn it," Tripp turned to Manuel. "Raise the alarm, now. It's run off into the ship."

"Yes, of course."

ARRROOOOO-GAH!

The control deck dimmed as red lights swiveled around the walls and floor.

Tripp, Alex, Nutrene, and Jaycee bolted through the door after the screaming monstrosity.

AROOOOOO-GAH!

"Emergency," came the recorded voice, "The alarm has been raised. Please be advised. Remain where you are until instructed otherwise. Thank you, and have a nice day."

Poz turned to Neg and bounced on the spot. They were alone at last.

"I dunno why they're bothering trying to kill it. The whole place is gonna be history soon."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Excited, Neg rolled back and opened up her orb-shaped back. A stack of canisters clanged to the floor, "Want me to prime them?"

"If you would be so kind, yes," Poz peeked at his transfer cable, "Sixty seconds and we have the data. We're going back home with Anderson, dead or alive. Preferably *dead.*"

"Aww," Neg squealed over the racket of the alarms, "Why dead?"

"Because the only good pussy is a dead pussy."

"Huh," Neg knocked into the canisters. The green light on top flashed, indicating they were set. Her eyebulbs turned white as she rolled her head up to the windshield, "Oxade, this is Neg Bass."

"Come in, Neg. What the hell is all that fuss I'm hearing on Beta?"

"Oh, they threatened to shoot each other. Nothing to do with us —"

"—They *what*?" Oxade screamed in both Poz and Neg's heads, "What do you mean threatened to shoot each other?"

"Rabinovich is on board Beta, Oxade," Poz said. "He turned into a man-spider thing and ran off. It was horrendous, quite frankly."

"Have you gone insane? Right, that's enough. I'm boarding Beta."

Neg knocked the canisters on the floor and threw a blue beam over them, “Ah, actually, I wouldn’t do that.”

The Control Deck

Space Opera Charlie

Oxade pulled the weapons cupboard open. He unhooked the D-REZ semi-automatic, extended its shoulder holster and booted the door shut.

“The nukes?” Oxade roared into his headgear and ran out of the deck, “*Please* tell me you planted the nukes?”

“Yes,” Poz’s voice rumbled into his ear, “They’re primed to go.”

“Good. You’ve just saved yourself a messy execution,” Oxade snatched a gelatin swab from the wall and raced along the walkway, “I’m boarding Beta and taking care of this. Stay there and wait for me.”

SCHLOOP.

He smeared the gelatinous mush around his face as he walked. The compound material stretched across his skin. Pockets of air burst out of his skin. The end result made his face look like it was covered in cellophane.

“Primary airlock, ETA twenty seconds.”

“There’s really no need to do that, Captain,” Poz’s voice reached Oxade’s helmet headgear, “We’d rather you not leave Charlie unmanned—”

“—I’d rather you not be a useless tin opener but you don’t hear me complaining, do you?”

Poz thought about Oxade’s retort, “Actually, yes I do—”

“—Shut up and open the damn bridge.”

SWISH!

The inner airlock door flew up and offered Oxade into the chamber.

“As you desire, Captain. In your own time.”

“Don’t patronize me, you mechanical moron.”

Level One Stairwell

Space Opera Beta

Tor stumbled down the steps. His swinging, most-severely head

clanged against the railings. Its mouth squealed in pain.

Six limbs shot out from his ribcage and pressed against the wall, aiding his decent.

His left leg slammed to the next step and broke apart. The connective flesh slipped away from his metallic femur 'bone' and swiped its talon.

His right leg fell off when it connected with the next step. Another limb burst out through his metallic ball joint. Tor was no longer an Androgyne but a fully-formed Shanta.

Tripp, Jaycee, Alex, and Nutrene reached the top step with their weapons aimed at the half-man, half-Shanta monstrosity, "Tor, stay where you are."

"Screeeeeeeee," the Shanta widened its slit and whipped Tor's head into the air.

SCHOMP-CLOTCH!

It caught Tor's jaw between its teeth and yanked it away from the top of his skull.

"Damn," Alex gasped, "That virus really kicks ass, doesn't it?"

BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!

Tripp and Jaycee opened fire on the creature. It gripped the railings with all twelve limbs and scurried down the next set of steps.

"Get it," Tripp shouted after it and continued down the staircase.

"Screeeeee," The Shanta's two front limbs hit the next step, tripped on something unexpected and crashed against the level two sign on the wall.

"Miew," came a whine of protest from the step.

The Shanta stomped four of its limbs to the floor and the remaining eight against the wall and ceiling and screeched in pain.

Jelly shifted her weight and stood to her feet, "Not again."

SCHTANG-SCHTANG!

She flung out her infinity claws by her sides and prepared to slash the creature.

"Jelly," Jaycee aimed his Rez-9 at the creature, "Get out of the way."

She turned over her shoulder and licked her lips, ready for war, "No."

"I mean it, Jelly."

The Shanta pushed itself from the wall like an octopus and bolted towards Jelly. She pulled her elbows back, ready to swipe at the monstrosity.

"*That's* Anderson?" Alex lowered his gun, trying to take the information in, "But sh-she's…"

"Yeah. Difficult to believe, huh?" Tripp spat. "Would you believe me if I told you she's pregnant, too?"

SWIPE-SWISH-CRACK!

Jelly right-hooked the Shanta, sending it hurtling over the rails between the stairs, "*Meow*."

WHOOOSH!

The Shanta plummeted between the stairs. Its limbs smashed against the stairs as it tumbled down.

The signage for levels two, three, and four flew past its slit as its screams echoed up the stairwell.

"Jelly, what did you do?" Jaycee barged past her and hopped down the next flight of stairs.

"I killed it," she said and followed him.

Tripp, Alex, and Nutrene ran down after them.

"Are you gonna tell us what that thing is, now?" Nutrene shouted after Tripp and Jaycee as they jumped down to the level three gantry.

"We've called it Symphonium," Tripp explained. "Some sort of messed up evolutionary virus."

Jelly peered over the staircase, "It came from the ocean. It turned the algae into fish. The fish into mammals. The mammals into apes. The apes into humans, and the humans into—"

"—Shaaantaaa," the monstrosity squealed from two floors below. Everyone jumped in their shoes as the volume of its voice rattled their ears.

Jelly pointed at Alex and Nutrene's faces, "Keep those masks on, humans."

"Yes, we will," Alex failed to comprehend the absurdity of his findings.

Jelly wrapped her infinity claws around the staircase railing and bent her knees, preparing to jump the next couple of flights.

"Jelly, what are you doing?" Tripp swung his gun at her.

She shot him a look of pure venom and swished her tail.

"I'm going to kill it *dead*," she squealed, "Go to Medix and get Wool."

"We can't leave you here on the ship. What if you don't make it off?"

"I'll make it off," Jelly's claws sparked up a frenzy, expressing her desire for death, "I'm going to rip Tor's battery out like you should have done days ago. Now, go!"

"But—"

HOP-SWISH!

Jelly swung her legs over the rail and plummeted down the gap in the staircase.

"Meeooowwwww…" her voice etched further and further away.

"Guys, let's go get Wool."

* * *

Jelly landed awkwardly paws-first at level five. She rolled onto her side and clutched her baby bump.

"Ughhh," she scrambled to her feet. The Shanta slapped its limbs along the ground, walls and ceiling, pulling itself across the corridor and well away from Jelly.

"Hey, Tor," Jelly screamed after it as she staggered to her feet, "Come back here."

"Screeeeeeee."

Jelly took a deep breath and lowered her head. The glow from within her stomach formed into three, glowing orbs.

She winced as she tried to move forward, "God. *Not now*."

The Shanta reached the door to Pure Genius. With nowhere else to go, it slammed its talons against the door in attempt to open it.

"Hey," Jelly flung her claws out by her hips and growled as she moved toward the cornered beast, "I know that's you in there, Tor."

The Shanta calmed down and turned to her. The talons on each of its twelve limbs swiped out, ready to kill.

"Shaaaaaantaaahh."

Jelly picked up the pace and ran toward it, "Tor, if you're in there, you better get ready to go to hell."

ROOOAAAARRRR!

Jelly jumped into the air and swiped at the creature. She missed and hit the wall.

The Shanta slithered to the side and punched her in face, sending the back of her head against the wall panel, forcing the door open.

SWISH.

"Welcome to Pure Genius," announced a friendly voice as the door opened. "Please be advised that this is a zero gravity environment."

Jelly laughed venomously and removed the back of her head from the broken panel. Shards of shattered plastic nestled in her hair. She leaned forward and grabbed the Shanta's mid-section on her paws.

"Come with me."

Before the Shanta could scream, she tightened her grip and yanked him back into the chamber with her.

The two of them tumbled into the middle of the perfect cuboid as if swimming underwater.

Jelly lifted her leg and booted the Shanta's slit with her knee. Its metal teeth nicked her leggings as it moved away.

She released the creature and kicked it against the wall.

Both Jelly and the beast waded through the air and hit the two

opposite sides, lighting up the tiles.

"Pure Genius activated," the voice advised. "Please specify your command."

RROOOOAAARRR!

The Shanta clapped its limbs against the wall and pushed itself forward like an octopus propelling itself from the Ocean bed.

SWISH-SWIPE.

Jelly ducked out of the path of the whizzing talons.

"Oh, no you don't," She pressed her body from the wall and up to the ceiling that contained the door, "Up here. *Woof-woof*!"

The Shanta's twelve limbs stiffened and prepared to dive skyward.

"Come and get some," Jelly squealed and froze solid. She waited for her assailant to spring towards her.

The pair made eye contact, trying to psyche each other out.

"Come on," Jelly screamed, goading the Shanta to attack, "What are you waiting for? Kill me."

The creature screamed and pushed itself away from the ground. It flew through the air and extended its first four limbs and talons.

Jelly gripped the lip of the door and pulled herself up and through the opening.

The sudden presence of gravity pulled her knees to the walkway ground as she leaned over the gap. She opened out her paw and slammed it against the wall panel as the first two limbs struck at her face.

"Agghh," Jelly squealed as the door sliced across the front of her face.

SWISH-SCHA-JUNT!

The door guillotined the Shanta's two front limbs from its body. Its muffled squeals whirled around the fully fired-up supercomputer. Two severed talons clanged to the floor by Jelly's knees.

"Meow," Jelly palmed the window in anger and looked at the trapped creature one last time, "Go to hell, *dickhead*."

Her tail swished left to right as she turned around and made her way back to the staircase.

The Shanta hung in the middle of Pure Genius with two of its limbs missing. Pink liquid from its severed arms launched into the air and splashed against the tiles like a Jackson Pollock painting.

It knew it was trapped – possibly for good.

Its center slit widened and tried to take in some air.

SCHTAM-SCHTAM-SCHTAM!

It extended all its remaining arms like a multi-pronged star. Three on the ground, three on the ceiling, and two pressed against the left and right wall.

It remained static like a fleshy cobweb, trapped forever inside

Pure Genius.

Medix

Space Opera Beta – Level Three

Tripp and Jaycee approached Medix ready to open fire on anything remotely unfamiliar.

Alex and Nutrene watched their six and their weapons up the corridor.

Manuel floated along with them, “Tripp?”

“Not now, Manuel.”

“I’m scared, Tripp.”

“What do you mean?” Tripp lowered his gun and turned to Jaycee, “I’ll go in there and grab Wool. Stay here.”

“Okay,” Jaycee joined Alex and Nutrene, “Listen up. We’re getting our friend and then getting the hell off this ship.”

Manuel slotted himself between Tripp and the door to Medix, “Tripp?”

“Can’t this wait, Manuel?”

“You’re not going to leave without me, are you? You know I can’t leave Opera Beta.”

“What?” Tripp acted defiant in the face of his autopilot. But the book had a point – he was restrained to the confines of the ship and knew it would never return home.

“Please don’t leave me here.”

“I’m sure there’s a way to transfer you to—”

“—There is not. Tripp. I cannot lie. They have their own autopilot. Almost certainly more advanced than I am.”

Tripp couldn’t look at the holograph any longer. He didn’t have an answer.

“I thought as much,” Manuel’s front and back cover slumped, resigned to its fate, “I’m going to leave, now.”

“I’m sorry, Manuel.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, “Keep telling yourself that.”

WHVOOM.

The book vanished, leaving the door in plain sight.

Tripp glanced at Jaycee, who looked away with a discreet sadness, “You did what you had to do.”

“There was no point in lying to him.”

Jaycee lowered his gun and nodded, “Stop pontificating. Get Wool. Now.”

Tripp entered the room and spotted Wool looking out of the window with a forlorn expression on her face, “I don’t know if you heard the alarms, but we need to get out of—”

She sniffed and placed her palm on the plastic window ledge.

“Look, Tripp. Look at Enceladus. It’s heading for Saturn”

He joined her at the window. The impossibly large ball of fire left a thick, pink vapor trail as it rocketed away. The vibrations of the window in her palm conveyed the sheer ferocity of the event.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Wool, we have to go.”

She kept facing the window with her arms folded and refused to move, “I c-can’t go.”

“Why not?”

He moved next to her and clocked her reflection in the plastic pane. Something about her face wasn’t right.

“I can never go home ever again, Tripp.”

He applied pressure to her shoulder and tried to comfort her, “Don’t be stupid, just—”

A cold sensation on his fingertips made him look down. A Shanta talon crept across his knuckles, stretching from Wool’s fleshy arm.

“Oh, no.”

A tear rolled down Wool’s cheek, “When you leave, close the door and seal me inside. Have Jaycee break the wall panel so I can’t get out.”

“Wool,” Tripp muttered.

“It’s okay,” she half-laughed and sniffed through her tears, “It was bound to happen sooner or later. We’re mostly human organs, after all. I guess the Symphonium just takes a little longer to work with our synthetic insides.”

She turned to him at once. His face fell when he clapped his eyes on hers. She seemed desperate and beyond hope.

“Oh, Wool,” Tripp’s lip quivered. He looked at her pink, bloodied arm. The skin cracked apart above the elbow. The three cat scratch marks pulsed and revealed a fleshy, white layer.

“Do you have your Rez-9?” she asked.

He offered her his weapon with caution, “Yes, of course. Here.”

“No, Tripp. I can’t do it.”

He pointed at his jaw, “Remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” she turned to the window and widened her eyes at the glorious ball of fire, “Say goodbye to the crew for me. Tell them if it was going to be anyone, then I’m glad it was them.”

A pink tear rolled down Tripp’s cheek as he hooked his index finger around the trigger. He placed the end of it at the back of her head.

Tripp's voice croaked, "Do you want me to tell Jelly—"

"—No. Don't tell her anything," she reached behind her head and gripped the barrel of the gun in her right hand, "In my battery, please."

Her hand dragged the nozzle down across her back and pushed it between her shoulder blades.

"I could just open you and take it out."

"Destroy it. Make sure I'm dead. Shoot it," Wool burst out crying, "Tell Jelly her mommy is sorry."

Tripp sobbed like a helpless child and made sure his reflection didn't give his emotions away.

Wool took a lungful of air and widened her eyes. The light from Saturn filled her pupils, "Whatever is out there, we found it—"

BLAMMM!

Her chest opened out and splattered her insides against the window. Globs of thick, pink goo slid down the plastic, against the view of Saturn and the infernal Enceladus.

Wool crumpled to the floor, dead. Her smashed battery hung out through her ribcage and hit the floor.

Tripp lowered his gun and wiped his face.

"Sleep well, Wool."

Tripp exited Medix and closed the door.

Jaycee, Alex, and Nutrene turned around, expecting to find two crew members.

Tripp lowered his Rez-9 and marched through them, "Wool won't be joining us."

"What? Why not?" Jaycee asked and chased up to Tripp, "Hey, you can't walk off like that."

THUD.

He planted his giant hand on Tripp's shoulder and prevented him from walking, "Answer me."

Tripp grabbed Jaycee by the collar and shunted his back to the wall. A miasma of self-doubt and fury flew through his eyes, "Don't you ever, *ever* touch me like that again."

Jaycee grabbed Tripp's hand and pushed it away from his neck, "You're out of your mind."

"I know I am. We all are."

"Where's Wool?"

Tripp snorted and continued up the walkway, "She's not coming."

"Why?"

"She's dead."

"Dead?"

Alex and Nutrene decided it best to let the two men carry on their

conversation a few feet ahead of them.

"Who's Wool?"

"Ah," Nutrene whispered, "My predecessor. Actually my second predecessor, after Katcheena. She was chief medician for USARIC. She oversaw the Star Cat Project back in *one-eighteen*."

Alex squinted at her, "*That* Wool? Wool ar-Ban? The Iranian?"

"Yeah, you know her?"

"Oh. Uh, no. Just heard about her," Alex cleared his throat and grew nervous, "Dead?"

"You heard the man," she smirked, "Still, her being dead is good practice for all of them soon enough, eh?"

Jaycee pummeled the wall with his fists in anger, "Bastards."

Tripp held out his arms, "Hey, hey, calm down. There's nothing any of us could have done—"

"—You didn't have to execute her, you know," Jaycee spun his wrists around, ready to break something. A protruding pipe knocked against his knee, "God damn it."

He grabbed the pipe in his hands and wrenched it from the wall in a fit of rage. A blast of steam sprayed into the walkway as he swung it above his head and hurled it up the corridor, "I swear to *God* I'm gonna shoot someone."

"Jaycee, no. No more deaths, please," Tripp screamed at him, "Who are you gonna shoot?"

"*Someone*."

"Let me ask you this, *tough guy*," he prodded Jaycee's exo-suit chest plate with his finger, "What if what you want to shoot is *inside* you? How are you gonna kill it?"

Jaycee slowed his breathing and pushed his captain's finger away, "I guess we'll find out soon enough. If it turned Tor and Wool, who's to say you and I aren't next?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Primary Airlock

Space Opera Beta

The inner airlock hatch slid up. Oxade clutched his D-REZ semi-automatic and entered Opera Beta proper.

He pressed his finger to the ear compartment on his gelatin helmet-mask, “Please tell me this piece of crap spacecraft has its control deck on level one.”

“It does,” Poz’s voice came through Oxade’s mask, “I advise you take the stairs. We can’t trust the elevator on this malfunctioning hunk of junk.”

“Pah. Morons can’t even get *that* right,” he took a look around the meager inner workings of the ship and chuckled to himself, “You’re right, though. Opera Beta really *is* a hunk of junk, isn’t it?”

“Soon to be *was*, I’ll think you’ll find.”

“Very true. I’ll see you in sixty seconds.”

Keen to express his disrespect for the ship, Oxade coughed up a wad of phlegm and spat it on the wall.

Neg danced around the nuclear canister’s beeps, “Beta gonna blow, Beta gonna blow.”

“Will you knock it off, Neg?” Poz eyed the last of the data transfer through his arm, “Any second *now*.”

Ba-Beep.

“Data transfer complete,” announced the communications console.

“Thank you, kindly,” Poz retracted his arm into his body.

Oxade marched into the control deck and stood in the middle of the room. He looked around with disgust, “Ugh, USARIC really broke the mold when they made Beta, didn’t they? This is one stinking hellhole, for sure.”

“Hello, Oxade.”

“Hey, guys. Where are the others?”

“Something very peculiar happened while we were conducting the transfer.”

“Did the transfer complete?”

“Yes,” Poz blinked his eyebulbs and beeped, “All fifteen brontobytes of it. The thing is, though—”

"—Where is everyone? I told Hughes and Nutrene to keep an eye on them."

"If you'd let me finish," Poz interrupted, "Something untoward occurred right over there, behind you."

Oxade's heels skidded across Tor's vomit patch by the chair, "Whoa," he yelped and gripped the sticky back rest.

"Ugh. What the hell is this?" He flung the pink slime from his glove.

"According to the Manuel's last data point, it's called Symphonium. An evolutionary entity from whichever celestial territory they visited."

"Celestial territory? What are you talking about?"

"The Manuel recording a place name. Pink Symphony. Not much else is known. I would say it certainly accounts for the virus that has pervaded the ship."

Oxade looked at the concoction of drool in his gloved palm and grew anxious, "You said there was something *untoward*?"

"Yes," Neg hopped over to Oxade and beeped, "They all ran off. Tor Klyce turned into a fleshy spider thing and puked on the floor."

"Eurgh," Oxade moved away from the puke on the floor and inspected his heel, "You could have warned me."

"Well, we did *try*."

"They're all Androgynes, bar two. The botanist woman and the Captain," Oxade scowled, "If there was a virus it won't have affected anyone but them."

Poz and Neg watched Oxade wipe the remains of the goo on the communications panel.

"You're wrong, I'm afraid," Manuel's voice sparked up. His book holograph drew along the air and sparked, announcing his arrival.

"Manuel?"

"Yes."

"Where are your crew, Manuel?"

"Do I detect a hint of antagonism in your voice, Captain Weller?"

"No, you don't."

"It's just that the way you're talking indicates that the safety of my crew is not of paramount importance to you."

"Manuel, I capture and kill felines for a living back on Earth," Oxade huffed. "Don't think my remit *doesn't* extend to autopilots. Where is the rest of your crew? In particular, Jelly Anderson?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"I am the Captain of Space Opera Charlie, you Spanish-named lamebrain," Oxade lifted his D-REZ firearm at the communications panel, "I therefore outrank, outnumber *and* outgun you. Now, for the *final* time of asking, and presuming you don't want your physical

memory to get blown to pieces, where are the others?"

"The others?"

"Yes, the others."

"As in, the crew?" Manuel butterflied around in the hope Oxade wouldn't shoot his physical home. He bought himself some time when he saw a distant figure move in the corridor behind the door.

"Yes, as you say, the *crew*."

"Oh. Level Ten, Engine & Payload," Manuel hoped Oxade would fall for his untruth, "We had trouble with the thrusters and wanted to check."

"Level Ten? Isn't that, like, a fifteen minute journey?"

"Yes, yes," Manuel clapped his covers together, congratulating himself. "I did it. He believed me."

"Who believed *you*?" Oxade fumed as he asked the question.

"Oh, uh, nothing," Manuel faux-cleared his throat, "Sorry, just another communication coming through. I think the crew will be at least thirty minutes."

Poz spun around to Neg and then back to Oxade, "Captain?"

"Yes, Poz?"

"I'm afraid to inform you that this autopilot is lying."

"I am *not* lying," Manuel lied.

"Lessense," Oxade waved Poz away, "Autopilots can't lie. Thanks for all your help, Manuel. We'll be on our way."

Manuel flapped his covers at the canisters, "Excuse me. You've forgotten your nukes."

Oxade made for the door. In doing so, he stepped into Tripp and Jaycee's path, "Oh."

Tripp eyed Oxade with suspicion, "What was that about nukes? Who are you?"

"Oxade Weller, captain of Opera Charlie," He extended his hand to shake, "We're here to rescue you."

Jaycee spotted the D-REZ in Oxade's hand, "You came prepared, I see?"

"Can't take any chances," Oxade turned to the Rez-9 in each of their hands, "And I could say the same about you."

Tripp shook the man's hand a little harder than expected, "Tripp Healy. Captain. We're relieved you managed to make it here to rescue us."

Alex and Nutrene walked into the control deck. They were surprised to see Oxade. He threw them a snarky smile as if to say 'shut up and let me speak.'

They nodded and lowered their guns.

"Your two crew members, here, very helpfully assisted us with tracking down a tango on board our ship."

Oxade nodded at the splattered chair and lifted up his goo-smeared glove, “So I see.”

“Don’t get any of that stuff on your person, by the way. It’s contagious.”

Oxade’s breath fogged up the inside of his mask, “Contagious?”

“You wouldn’t *believe* the journey we’ve been on,” Jaycee said. “We’ve been to the center of the multiverse. We saw the nucleus of evolution with our own eyes.”

“And we rescued *her*,” Tripp added.

Oxade took a step away and looked around the control deck, “Am I right in thinking you’ve made one of the most important discoveries of our lifetime?”

“No,” Tripp said. “We’ve made *the* most important discovery of *all* time.”

Oxade grabbed his gun with both hands. He readied himself for action. To the others, it looked as if he was getting comfortable.

Both conclusions were true.

“We have to get back to Earth,” Tripp said. “We need to get Jelly home so she can cure us all.”

“Cure you?”

“She’s pregnant,” Tripp said. “We think her litter is the key to life, when it arrives.”

Oxade laughed with a degree of venom, “You’re not serious, are you?”

“Deadly serious, yes.”

“Do you realize how stupid that sounds?”

“Actually, yes. But it’s the truth.”

“*Lessense*,” Oxade lifted his gun at Jaycee and Tripp. They knew something like this was coming. Alex and Nutrene circled around them and pointed their guns at both men’s faces.

“Okay, here’s what’s gonna happen,” Oxade said. “You’re going to call Anderson and get her to board Charlie. Once she’s on, we’ll join her and leave you here. Where are Wool ar-Ban, Haloo Ess, Bonnie Whitaker, Tor Klyce, and Baldron Landaker?”

“They’re all dead,” Tripp held his hands in the air along with Jaycee, “Only Jaycee and me left.”

Oxade shouted at Manuel, “Is that true? Are they all dead?”

“No, they’re all alive. Tripp is lying to you,” Manuel sped up his speech, “They’re on their way to come and kill you.

Tripp and Jaycee turned to each other – initially confused, but very quickly tuned in with what Manuel was up to.

“No, Manuel,” Tripp yelled, adding to Oxade’s confusion. “They can’t know they’re all alive.”

“I *knew* it, they’re not dead,” Oxade palmed the lever on the side

of his K-SPARK and pointed it at the communications console. He turned to Nutrene and Alex, “Kill them!”

“Tripp, Jaycee – *now*,” Manuel screamed and whizzed into the air.

BLAAMMMM!

Oxade fired a shot at the communications desk. Its panels and wiry guts burst out from the wall in a haze of electric sparks. Manuel’s holographic book form began to fizzle away as a result of the explosion, “I’m hit.”

Nutrene fired a shot at Tripp.

“Get down,” Jaycee jumped on his back and pushed him to the ground. The bullet flew out of her Rez-9 and whizzed past Tripp’s head, slicing several strands of his hair away from his head.

Jaycee hit the deck with Tripp. He lifted his gun at Oxade and fired a shot.

KER-SPLATCH!

The bullet penetrated the side of Oxade’s left shin, pushing him to the ground.

Nutrene buried her gun in Jaycee’s face and winked at him, “Nighty-night, big boy.”

“Arrrgghhhh.”

THRA-AA-TT-A-TT!

Jaycee closed his eyes and felt a splatter of liquid hit his face. No pain followed, much to his amazement.

He opened his eyes to see Alex had shot her in the shoulder.

“Huh?”

He kicked Nutrene onto the floor and offered Jaycee his hand, “Get up.”

“Huh?”

Jaycee grabbed his hand and climbed to his feet. Alex turned his gun to Poz and Neg, “You two battery bunnies stay *right* where you are.”

Oxade and Nutrene rolled around on the floor. They clutched at their injuries and screamed blue murder.

“You bastard,” Oxade climbed to his feet and went for his D-REZ a few feet away from him.

“Ahh, da-da-da,” Alex moved with him and rammed the barrel of his firearm into his head, “Hey, scumbag. Make a move and I’ll re-carpet this place with your brain matter.”

Oxade thumped the floor in anger, “Alex? What do you think you’re doing?”

“Stay there,” Alex stepped back and grabbed Tripp’s hand, “Don’t move, so help me God I’ll split your skull open with a bullet.”

“Alex?” Oxade gasped and lifted himself up by the communications panel, “You traitor.”

“You shut up,” he yelled back, much to the amazement of Tripp and Jaycee, “You wanna talk about being a traitor?”

Oxade spluttered and removed his glove. He felt the bleeding wound on his shin and pressed the sole of his foot to the floor, “USARIC will find you. They’ll execute you.”

“I’m counting on it. Now stay there.”

“Who are you?” Tripp asked, not quite sure where to point his Rez-9.

“Alex Hughes. I’ll explain later. Let’s get off this ship.”

“Good luck, *traitor*,” Poz rolled toward Alex and threatened to make contact, “You’ll never escape the blast. Come here for a killing.”

Alex pushed Tripp and Jaycee toward the door, “Get back. Don’t let it touch you.”

“*It*?” Poz barreled forward, “That’s a bit rude, isn’t it? I’m quite clearly a *he*.”

THRAAAAATTT!

Alex fired into the middle of Poz’s body, pushing him back. The bullets absorbed into his body, leaving behind an array of minuscule dents.

Poz spun around and rolled into Neg. His body began to absorb into her.

“Hey, you can’t do that,” Neg complained.

“How long till detonation?” Alex asked. “*How long*?”

“Ten Earth minutes,” Poz beeped with joy, “We’re all going to die. We’re all going to die.”

Alex turned to Tripp and Jaycee, “Where’s Anderson?”

Tripp shook his head, “She’s, uh… I d-don’t know?”

“Does she have Viddy Media?”

“Viddy-what?” Jaycee asked.

Alex rolled up his outer-suit sleeve and showed them his black ink, “Viddy Media.”

“Is that what they’re calling it now?” Tripp blurted. “No, she never had it installed.”

“Damn,” Alex thought on his feet and swung his D-REZ at Oxade and Nutrene, threatening to blow them to pieces, “Listen, get on Charlie.”

“We have no outer-suits left,” Jaycee said.

“Doesn’t matter. Use the bridge. Don’t look at anything, just run. I’ll take care of these scumbags.”

“Ten minutes? We’ll never make it out alive.”

“Well, it’s either that or we *definitely* die,” Alex huffed in haste, “Wanna give it a go?”

“Okay, we’ll go,” Jaycee said. “And, thanks.”

“Yeah, we’ll open up a tea shop together later,” Alex quipped,

“Now, go.”

Tripp and Jaycee ran out of the control deck and made their way to the primary airlock.

Alex leaned against the door frame and lowered his gun. He surveyed the battered room and smiled at his Captain, “Hey, Oxade.”

“Leave me alone, you treacherous little runt,” he slumped into the splattered swivel chair. Resigned to an early death, he leaned back and hung his arms down by his side, “If you’re going to kill us, just do it already.”

Nutrene rolled around on the floor and clutched her arm. Her cries of anguish didn’t stop the conversation between the two men.

“Oh, I will.”

“Just tell me one thing, *Hughes*,” Oxade said. “How did—Hey, Nutrene, can you stop your screaming, woman?”

“He shot me in the d-damn shoulder.”

A smart bomb grenade tumbled across the ground and knocked the side her hand.

“I don’t care. Just quit your whining, I can’t hear myself *hear myself*,” Oxade yelped.

“You were saying?” Alex asked.

“Yeah. H-How did you get in? To USARIC?”

“It’s a long story, my friend,” Alex stepped over to Nutrene and snatched the smart bomb from her clutches, “Give me that.”

“Ugghhh, and to think I had the hots for you.”

“In your dreams, grandma,” Alex snorted and returned to the door. He set the grenade down by the wall in the corridor.

“PAAC?” Oxade asked. “You’re part of that stupid animal cruelty pack of inbred imbeciles?”

“Nah, they’re long gone, now. We’re a new breed, I guess you could say.”

“Like a revolution?”

“More like an *evolution,*” Alex snorted through his mask, “A plan five years in the making. If you thought USARIC were ruthless killers, you should check *us* out.”

Oxade shook his head. “Why, Alex? Why all this?”

Alex stepped out through the door and gripped the frame in his hand, “Because USARIC is a hell-sucking, mega-conglomerate behemoth that needs taking down. We can’t have whatever Opera Beta and Anderson discovered falling into their hands, now. Can we?”

“You’re so dead.”

Alex gripped the door and pulled it across it slider, “You first.”

SCHLAMMM!

He took several steps back and aimed his D-REZ at the panel.

THRAATATATT-SCH-PACKKK!

He fired a semi-automatic burst of bullets at the panel, shutting the door down and sealing the bad guys in.

Alex's parting shot – a swift flip of the bird through the window – provided the icing on the cake.

Alex sprinted along the gantry and looked for the staircase. He lifted his left forearm to his face and pressed the ink on his skin to his wrist, "Tripp? This is Alex, do you read me?"

Tripp's voice came from his wrist, "Yes, I read you. We're at the Primary Airlock, now. We, uh, found *something*."

"What?"

"Get down here, quick. We're going to need your help."

"I'm on my way…" he cut the connection off and ran into the depths of the walkway.

The smart bomb outside the control deck remained perfectly still – for a few seconds.

Then, it came to life and shifted around.

CLICK-CLANG.

It fell onto its side and rolled toward the door. The outer shell warbled and expanded.

"Nggg…" it's feminine voice squealed. The shell casing liquefied and streaked across the floor, "Ugh, I hate this *so* much…"

The liquid twisted a few inches into the air and formed a cylindrical shape about the size of a beach ball.

A secondary 'head' inflated into a silvery metal. It shook its head and blinked its eyebulbs.

"Ah," Neg bounced against the door, fully-formed, "That's better."

"Neg," Oxade's damp screams came from within the control deck, "Get us out of here."

"I'm way ahead of you," she said and pressed her curved 'chest' against the door.

SCHWIZZ-SCHPAANG!

A metal sphere formed around her frame and spun at speed, twisting the image of the door in front of her, "Poz, get ready."

Poz hopped up and down from the other side of the door and looked through the window, "What? How did you get out there?"

"Just shut up and connect."

Neg's magnetic strength slipped through the door and pulled Poz toward it.

"Hey, what are you—"

"—Saving everyone's life, you numb skull. Get over here, now."

Oxade scooped his D-REZ from the floor and unclipped the magazine. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a fresh one as he

watched Poz's body lasso toward the door. His lower frame swept the detritus and mess out of his path.

"This is *most* embarrassing."

"Just shut up and open the door, nitwit," Oxade palmed the magazine into his gun and turned to Nutrene, "Hey, you."

"What?"

"How's the arm?"

Nutrene picked up her Rez-9 in her bad arm. She focused her monocle on the bleeding wound, "I'll live."

SCHWUNT!

Poz and Neg slammed together on opposite sides of the door. They blinked their eyebulbs at each other.

"Nice to see you again, sweetie," Neg beamed.

"Yeah, whatever. Just help me open this stupid door."

They slid down to the floor together and rolled across the door railings, pulling it open.

CREEEAAAAAKKK!

"Oxade," Neg beeped, "The door is open, as per your request.

"Thanks, guys," Oxade and Nutrene looked at each other through their masks.

"New plan," he gesticulated with his D-REZ, barely able to contain his anger, "I'm going to put a bullet in Alex's brain. And then Jaycee's."

"Good plan."

"And then I'm going to make Anderson watch me remove Tripp's head, turn it upside down and thump it down the neck hole."

"Upside down? I like that," Nutrene snarled, wanting revenge, but kept up the professional pretense, "Oh. As Opera Charlie's medician, do you mind if I perform a live vivisection on that bitch of a cat?"

"Be my guest, but on one condition."

"What's that?" Nutrene licked her lips and walked toward the door.

"Make it as slow and painful as possible. I want to watch the life fade away from her eyes."

"Get in line, sweetie."

"Kill 'em," Oxade yelled and kicked the chair into the damaged communications console on his way out, "Kill 'em all."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Primary Airlock

Space Opera Beta

"Manuel?" Tripp snapped his fingers as he reached the inner airlock door.

"Y-y-yessss," The book flickered and spasmed in the air, never fully coming to life, "I c-can't—"

"—Manuel, what's wrong?"

"Oxade shot my m-mainframe. I'm d-dying—" Manuel buzzed in and out of the air.

Tripp realized there and then that Manuel was dying in front of his and Jaycee's eyes.

"You're l-leaving Op-p-p-pera B-Beta—"

"—No, no, damn it," Tripp went to grab Manuel. He forgot that the book couldn't be touched, "We can take you with us. Install you on their comms panels."

"N-No. I'm obsolete. It'll never work," Manuel's voiced ground to super-slow motion, "It's over, Tripp."

White sparks zipped away from the book as it took its final curtain call, "I managed it, though, d-didn't I? I l-lied for you."

Tripp half-smiled and held his thumb up to the transparent book, "You did. You bought us time."

"Goodbye, T-Tripp. Jaycee," Manuel's last words screeched to a halt. His image flapped away like a dove toward the ceiling and burst into several thousand digital atoms, never to be seen again.

Jaycee thumped the wall in anger, "Bastards."

"No time to mourn, now. We gotta get off Beta. Open the airlock."

"With pleasure," Jaycee yanked on the lever. The inner airlock door slid up into the ceiling.

"Wait, what about Jelly?" Tripp asked. "Where is she?"

"I dunno—"

SCHTOMP-SCHTOMP-SCHTOMP…

The two men turned to a colossal thumping noise coming from the other end of the walkway.

Jelly Anderson stormed toward them. They flinched with each step she took.

"There you are," Tripp said.

“Where’s my mommy?” Jelly looked around, expecting to find Wool with them.

“No time for questions, pet,” Tripp stood aside and allowed her in the airlock.

“I’m not going anywhere without my mommy.”

Tripp looked over her shoulder, “Jelly, listen. Your *mommy* didn’t make—”

He cut his sentence short when he clamped eyes on the wet patch between her legs. A dusty Kevlar panel hung by her knee. The fabric of the leggings were torn apart, “Jelly, did you embarrass yourself again?”

She looked down at her thighs and whined, “Miew.”

“Where did that liquid come from?”

“Uh, guys?” Jaycee waved Jelly and Tripp in from the airlock compression chamber.

Jelly reached into the chest compartment at the front of her exo-suit, “Let’s get out of here—”

“Oh my God,” Tripp gasped.

A tiny, goo-drenched kitten lay shivering on her palm. It meowed with its eyes shut, clinging to Jelly’s infinity claws.

Stunned, Tripp and Jaycee looked at Jelly for a reaction.

“My baby,” Jelly held the kitten for both men to see, “We have to protect her.”

“But-but,” Tripp swallowed and went to touch the newborn kitten. His sleeves rolled up the length of his arm, revealing the holes on his wrist.

“This is Alex. Do you read me?”

Tripp moved his wrist to his mouth, “Yes, Alex. We’re at the Primary Airlock, now. We, uh, found *something*.”

“What?” Alex’s voice came from Tripp’s IndividiMedia ink.

“Get down here, quick. We’re going to need your help.”

“I’m on my way.”

Jelly cradled the kitten in her arms. The light from the fireball rocketing towards Saturn illuminated its gorgeous, fluffy face.

“It’s a she?”

Jelly nodded and purred, “Yes.”

Jaycee joined Tripp and tried not to let his emotions override the severity of their situation.

“Jelly, listen. We don’t have any outer-suits. We need to cross the bridge to Charlie as quick as we can.”

“But we can’t breathe in space?” Jelly asked.

“No,” Jaycee pointed to the bridge through the window, “You have to exhale. Push all the air out of your lungs and hold until we get there.”

Tripp took Jelly's newborn in his hands. The gunk slopped between his fingers, "What are you going to call her?"

"—Tripp, man," Jaycee screamed, "Not now. We need to leave."

He stormed into the airlock compression chamber and waved the pair in with him, "Let's go."

Jelly took the kitten from Tripp as they made their way into the airlock.

He double-took and looked at the door. A pang of déjà vu throttled through his body, "There's something very familiar about all this."

Jaycee grunted, "You *don't* say."

"Guys, wait for me," Alex reached the door and immediately spotted Jelly carrying her kitten. "My God, what happened?"

"She gave birth," Tripp said. "You know how to operate Charlie when we get in, right?"

"Yes," Alex hopped into the airlock and pressed his fingers around his mask, "Where are your outer-suits?"

"We don't have time."

Jelly ran the side of her face against her kitten, "Hey, honey. Don't be scared."

"What about that *thing*?" Alex pointed to the kitten, only for Jelly to take offense.

"She's not a *thing*."

SCHWUMP.

The inner-door slammed down, instigating the start of the decompressions process. A blast of white gas filled the chamber.

"Right," Jaycee grabbed the lever next to the outer-door, "Let's get out of here and go home."

"Wait, let me go first," Alex pushed his way to the front, "Jaycee, when we get there, Manny might not open the door for you. She will for me, though."

"Okay," Jaycee turned over his shoulder, "Everyone ready?"

Tripp nodded, "Jelly, cover the kitten's mouth."

"Okay," she exhaled and stood poised to blast through the door.

"ETA sixty seconds, here we go," Jaycee yanked the lever down.

SWISH!

The door slid up, allowing them onto the bridge. They had expected it to be a silent journey. The white bridge seemed whiter than usual.

GRRROOOOOAAARRRRRR!

Jaycee gripped the shuddering railings and pulled himself forward, "What the hell?"

He squinted at the blinding light coming from Saturn, above. The

fiery Enceladus sunk into it, throwing the planet's surface out like an exploded balloon sticking to the stars.

He held his hand over his eyes and ignored it, pulling himself forward.

Alex followed, clocking some of the celestial event as he moved forward, "Jesus Christ. Look at *that*."

His feet drifted across the bridge floor. Saturn's rings began to gyrate as if wading through a magnificent lump of treacle. The stars pushed aside as the planet's body pounded away like an aggressive boom box.

"What the hell is happening up there?" Alex muttered, wide-eyed at the spectacular light show. He held out his hand for Tripp, "Come on."

Tripp covered his eyes with his left palm. He grabbed Alex's hand with his right.

"Come on, let's go. Quick."

Jelly cradled her daughter in her elbow and protected her with her claws. She used her free hand for balance as she traversed the bridge.

GWAAAARRRR… WVHOOSH…

A shower of light bleached out their surroundings. Saturn seemed to be growing. Jaycee and Alex saw a giant black hole form like a crazy, liquid cartwheel over its surface.

"Go, go, go—" Alex pushed Jaycee along the bridge and gripped the rails, propelling himself after him, "Tripp, come on."

Alex's voice may have fallen on deaf ears in the vacuum of space, but his haste in ushering Jelly and her newborn couldn't be ignored.

"Jelly, *please*."

She opened her eyes and clutched her baby tighter than ever, "I'm coming."

SWISH!

Oxade ran into the airlock with his K-SPARK and thumped the outer door, "Look at them. They think they can abscond on *our* ship?"

Nutrene held her arm as she stepped inside the chamber with her Rez-9.

Poz and Neg rolled in with them, "Commencing decompression. Standby."

SPRIISHHH!

Jelly turned to face him with her daughter's scruff in her mouth. The kitten hung in against of her chin and thrashed its spindly legs around.

"Hey," Oxade thumped the outer airlock door in an attempt to catch Jelly's attention, "Get back here and die like a good little pussy."

The decompression stopped as soon as the outer airlock hatch flung open. Oxade kicked himself away from the frame of the door and arrowed behind Jelly.

Alex caught his action just in time and pointed behind her, “Jelly. Behind you.”

“What?”

FWUMP!

Oxade bolted across the bridge and socked Jelly in the face. Her jaw opened, releasing her newborn into space, and away from the bridge.

“There’s a good *girl*,” Oxade shouted under his mask, “Let daddy pass.”

“Jeez,” Alex placed the sole of his boot on the railing. He pushed himself after the flying kitten as it headed away from the bridge. He just about caught her in his hands.

Jelly massaged her jaw, taken aback by the attack. She flung her claws out at Oxade. Her eyes felt fit to burst in the airless void.

Tripp and Jaycee reached Opera Charlie’s outer airlock door. They hadn’t seen the commotion – their attention was on Charlie’s outer airlock hatch.

“Open up,” Tripp said with his last breath, “Now.”

A miracle.

Opera Charlie’s outer hatch opened up and allowed him and Jaycee inside. They pulled themselves in and immediately felt the pressure inside, as if their bodies were about to burst.

“Get in,” Tripp pushed himself against the chamber and turned to Alex. A few blobs of pink liquid streaked across the air from Tripp’s tear ducts. He tried to grab a few of them, but missed.

Jaycee moved forward and hit the lever on the wall.

SCHWUNT-SWISSSH!

The outer hatch closed, forcing the chamber to decompress.

Tripp staggered to his knees and took a lungful of oxygen, “Gaaaah.”

Jaycee did the same, coughing the infinite void of space from his lungs, “Ugh, I thought my chest was going to explode.”

“Jelly,” Tripp pushed himself to the window. Alex blocked the view as he carried the kitten in his arms, “They’re going to die.”

Alex waved his hands, forcing them to open the door. The events on the bridge – Alex barreled toward them, and Jelly preparing to attack Oxade – seemed to play-out in ultra-slow motion.

WHUMP-WHUMP-WHUMP.

Alex thumped the door, “Let us in.”

Jaycee stormed over to the inner-door and grabbed the lever.

The door slid up, “Tripp, get in.”

“Yeah,” he turned around and launched himself into Opera Charlie proper, “Is there anyone else on board?”

“How should I know?” Jaycee stepped after him and yanked the lever down on the inner door wall, “You got your firearm on you?”

Tripp unhooked the Rez-9 from his belt and armed it, “Oh, yeah. We made it, Jaycee.”

“We haven’t made it, *yet*. We don’t know who – or what – is on board Charlie.”

“I’ll head for the control deck. Try to get us out of here.”

“Good idea. I’ll make sure Charlie team doesn’t get in,” Jaycee turned watched Alex thumping the wall yet again, presenting the kitten at the window, “Go, go, go…”

“Okay,” Tripp looked around and ran off in the direction he thought would take him to the control deck.

Jaycee hit the second lever, opening the outer airlock door.

Alex pushed the newborn kitten into the airlock and followed her in, giving Jaycee the ‘thumbs up’ through the window.

His jaw dropped as he turned to the blinding-white bridge. Saturn’s rings gyrated faster and faster. A liquid circle formed over its surface. It appeared to sing as it enveloped the two ships with a brilliant white light.

“My *G-God*…”

SCHWUMP.

Alex couldn’t believe his eyes. A wondrous event was in full swing. He caught the newborn in his arms as the decompression thundered around them, “What’s happening up there?”

Jaycee yanked the second lever down and opened the inner door, “Give me the baby.”

Alex bolted through the door and passed the kitten to Jaycee, “Something insane is happening up there.”

“I know. We saw it,” Jaycee inspected the kitten. She’d bled a little form her facial orifices but was still breathing, “We need to protect Anderson’s baby.”

“What about Jelly?” Alex pointed at the door.

Oxade and Jelly faced-off in the middle of the bridge. He aimed his gun at her and threatened to shoot, “My name is Oxade Weller. I am the captain of Opera Charlie,” he said before realizing Jelly couldn’t hear a word. She could see he was speaking through his mask, but little else.

Nutrene sidled past him on the bridge with her Rez-9 drawn. Her monocle rotated and focused on Jelly, “Let me take care of this putrid

ball of fluff."

Jelly lowered her claws and huffed. The absence of atmosphere began to crack the fur and skin on her arms. She harnessed the pain and used it to psyche herself up, ready for war.

"It's very pretty out here, isn't it?" Nutrene looked up at the angry blue planet spinning its rings. She pointed her gun at Jelly's heart, "Now surrender. You're a perversion of science."

Jelly whined. Her muscles tensed up as she held her claws out in surrender.

"Good girl," Nutrene laughed through her mask, "Who's a good girl? Yes, *you are*," she pulled herself along the bridge with her free arm, "Come here for a murdering, you fluffy little—"

SCHWUPP!

Nutrene's gun lifted away from her palm and shot up to Saturn's spinning rings, "Huh?"

She grabbed at it – to no success. The gun sped at that bizarre circular formation smothering Saturn's surface.

Nutrene made the mistake of looking up at the spectacle, "Oh, m-my," Her monocle swirled around, focusing on her gun drifting towards the planet, "*It is God*!"

"Meow," Jelly snarled and swiped her claws across Nutrene's face. Her mask burst apart. The lens in her monocle cracked.

The gelatin frontage sucked into her face and blasted three perfect streams of gas towards Saturn, depriving the woman of oxygen.

"H-Help m-me…"

Nutrene let go of the rails. The pull from Saturn yanked her eyeball through her broken monocle, forcing her head away from the bridge. Her chest cracked out and made its way towards the blackened surface of Saturn as she suffocated to death.

"Aaggghhhh…" Nutrene's suit tore open and punched a hole in her torso. Her organs plumed out and stretched away from her body.

"Oh God," Oxade raced forward and kicked himself down to his back. He spun around on his side and watched what little remained of Nutrene fold out.

The bones in her body crunched together and threw her remains at Saturn like a stretched piece of chewing gum.

Jelly's hair began to lift toward the cataclysmic black event on Saturn, "Miew."

She turned around and held onto the bridge railing and yanked herself toward Opera Charlie.

"Oh, God, Nutrene."

He witnessed the bottom half of her body, and legs, stretch over thousands of miles and melt into the fantastic light show above his

head. Her monocle elongated as her messy amalgam of bone, flesh and skin snaked toward the angry planet.

Oxade felt his feet drift up and away from the bridge, “Come back here,” he screamed, pulling himself toward Jelly.

Poz and Neg peeked out from Opera Beta’s outer airlock hatch and scanned the bridge, “Seems stable enough.”

“Yes, but what about that black hole?” Neg tilted her eyebulbs directly above their heads.

“We can make it,” Poz said. “I don’t want to die on this crappy spaceship.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Neg rolled across the bridge at speed, headed toward Oxade and Jelly.

Oxade clung to the bridge and felt his shin bones crack apart, “Oh, oh…”

Jelly spun around and slammed the outer airlock door, “Let me in.”

Alex hit the lever on the wall. The hatch flew up and let Jelly into the decompression chamber. She tumbled backwards and hit her tail on the wall, “Mieewww.”

Oxade grabbed the outer door edges, trying to fight back the force of the event taking place above them. He looked at the ground and tried for one last push.

“Nyaaarrggghhhhhh…”

WHIZZ…

Neg rolled into the chamber underneath his chest as he pulled forward.

“Hello, Captain.”

“Gah, gah,”

Oxade wrenched the top half of his body through the frame of the airlock door.

SCHWUNT-SMASH!

The hatch sliced down on his right foot and severed it from his ankle.

“Gaaooww,”

The compressed air blasted around Jelly, Neg, and Oxade, sealing them in from the bridge.

Jelly caught her breath and held the end of her tail. The pain was sensational and angered her to the core.

Oxade and Neg looked up at her.

“N-Neg…” Oxade looked through the window and saw his severed foot drift through space, headed for Saturn, “Touch Jelly for me.”

“My pleasure,” Neg twisted around and rolled forward, threatening to make contact.

Jelly back up to the inner door, “Stay away from me.”

“Come here, girl,” Neg slid forward and beeped, “I want to *absorb* you.”

Jelly elbowed the inner door behind her, “Alex. Open the hatch.”

“Touch her, you useless marble,” Oxade shouted at Neg.

“Okay, okay,” She rolled further forward, nanoseconds away from making contact.

Jelly gripped the inner hatch, closed her eyes and squealed.

Neg almost made contact with Jelly’s knee. Her cylindrical body lifted ten inches into the air and rocketed back toward the outer airlock door.

CLANNNGGG!

Her frame smashed against the bottom of the door like a super-powerful magnet, “What the hell?”

Neg looked around and saw Poz on the other side of the door slowly drifting up toward Saturn’s event.

“Neg, Neg,” Poz’s muffled squeals blasted from the window, “Help me. Don’t let me go.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Neg slid up the door with Poz, their magnetized surfaces keeping them bound together.

“Don’t l-let me go up there, I’m scared.”

Jelly and Oxade’s watched the magnetic droids share a moment together as Poz’s body dragged Neg further up the outer airlock door.

“Work with me, here, Neg,” Poz said. “Let me in.”

Jelly screamed and clanging her claws against the window, “Alex, open the damn hatch.”

Alex kept his grip on the lever and eyed the pressure inlet dial, “I’m waiting for the chamber to reset. C’mon, c’mon, c’mon…”

Biddip-beeeeeeeep.

The lever lit up, indicating the decompression had concluded.

SWISH!

Alex yanked the lever down. The inner airlock hatch flew up. Jelly backward-rolled inside Opera Charlie..

She thumped her claws to the ground and growled at Oxade and Neg.

“Come here, you defiant *cow*,” Neg attempted to break away from Poz’s magnetic charge from the other side of the outer airlock hatch.

“Alex,” Jelly shouted, “Now.”

He thumped the lever down.

SLAMM-SCHWUNT!

The inner hatch slammed shut, sealing Neg and Oxade inside the

airlock chamber.

Jelly grunted and slapped her tail against the ground. Alex let go of the lever and turned to her, “What d-do we do, now?”

She trained her eyes on the window as she stood to her feet and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Jelly?” Alex asked in fright.

She pushed him aside and made her way to the yellow pressure inlet dial. She punched through the glass and turned the dial counter-clockwise, raising the pressure.

Screeeeeeeeee… the spindle on the dial daggered to the right, flying up the atmosphere pressure numbers.

“Oh no,” Oxade’s muffled voice splashed against the window of the inner airlock door. He scrambled to his bleeding stump, realizing what was about to happen, “Please, Anderson. *Don’t…*”

Jelly ran her tongue along her bottom lip and scowled at Neg, then at Oxade, imprisoned in her little playground.

“Anderson, p-please,” Oxade begged. He pressed his gloved palms to his ears in an attempt to block the pressure increase.

“Let us out of here,” Neg threw bolts of electricity out from her body. Each multi-pronged whip of lightning crawled along the four chamber walls, “Don’t do it.”

“Jelly,” Alex placed his hand on top of Jelly’s as she held onto the dial, “Don’t do this.”

Jelly purred and threw his hand off her paw, “They killed my mommy.”

“I know, but *don’t do it*. They’re trapped. They can’t get out. Let USARIC deal with them when we get back.”

“They are nothing but vermin to me. Useless, stinking rodents. Look at them,” Jelly rolled her shoulders wanting death. Her long, dark orange hair flowed down her back as she turned to watch the execution, “You might want to look away.”

“Oh God, don’t—” Alex couldn’t bear to watch any longer.

Jelly took one last look at Oxade’s face. Fissures and blisters cracked across his forehead and exposed facial skin. He shook his head ‘no’ and pressed his palms together, “You’re a *monster*.”

“I’m not a monster, Alex,” Jelly screwed her face and allowed the anger in her heart to flow up her torso and rocket into her arm. “I’m a *mother*.”

SCHWUNT!

“For God’s sake, Jelly,” Alex grabbed her hand and tried to remove it from the compression lever, “What do you think you’re doing—”

“—Don’t touch me,” Jelly shoved Alex onto his ass. She kept the dial forced to the right and watched the spindle reached its maximum

pressure point.

Oxade slumped to his knees and held his neck for dear life. His mask bloated out and crushed into his face. His suit tore into strips. Neg's ball-like surface indented and crushed in on itself, killing her instantly.

THWUMP!

Jelly smashed the dial with her fist, "Can you hear this?"

Neg's body rolled up the inside of the outer door hatch along with Poz. The charge caused the door to crush outward and create an opening into outer space.

"Got it," Poz squealed, hanging from the opening at the bottom of the airlock hatch, "Now, let me in—"

"—No, Poz," Neg screamed, "We'll die—"

SCHLAAAM!

Jelly screamed into the window, "Meow."

The chamber rocked against the intense pressure drop.

A rope of blood daggered from Oxade's mouth as he screamed, "Noooo—"

SCHPLATTTTT!

His body exploded, throwing his insides through the hatch opening. A concoction of destroyed Oxade limbs and organs rocketed towards Saturn.

"*Holy h-hell,*" Alex backed away from Jelly as she watched every second of Oxade and Neg's death, "J-Jelly, y-you're a—"

"—*Killer*?" She turned to face him matter-of-factly and with little emotion.

"Y-Yes"

"That's right. Don't ever forget it."

Alex pressed his hands against the hatch window. He saw Poz and Neg fly with Oxade's remains towards Saturn.

"What have y-you d-done?"

"I took out the trash," She pushed herself away from the door and stormed down the walkway, "Now let's get out of this hellhole."

Alex clambered to his feet and raced after her, "Where are you going?"

"To the control deck," she shouted over her shoulder, "Keep your mask on. I'm still toxic."

"Toxic?"

"I'm carrying Symphonium. Keep your mask on," Jelly turned her walk into a sprint, clanging her claws along the walkway, "Who's got my child?"

"Uh, I gave her to Jaycee."

"I want my baby. Give me my baby."

Jaycee carried Jelly's kitten into the control deck to find Tripp negotiating with Manny. She hung in the air, refusing to budge.

"What's the score?" Jaycee asked.

"She won't listen to me," Tripp turned to Manny, "Look, this is serious."

"Manny?" Jaycee muttered.

"I'm sorry, Tripp. I can only take instructions from a commanding officer or my captain. And they are dead."

"We're *all* dead if you don't enable the thrusters and get us out of here," Tripp tried to little avail.

"Want me to threaten her?" Jaycee passed the kitten to Tripp, "Give it some of the old 'user friendly' approach?"

"I'm afraid that will not work."

Tripp held the messy kitten in his arms and stared at its face. She nestling into his arms and opened her gunky eyelids.

"Look at you, you have no idea what's going on, do you?" He said, looking at his forearm. The blisters on his synthetic skin bubbled and popped, "Are you okay, Jaycee?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Ruptured a few vessels. Kind of annoyed about discovering I'm not human, but that's nothing that a good sleep won't fix," Jaycee clenched his fist and threatened to punch the console, "Manny. If we die, you're coming with us."

Jelly stormed into the room with Alex, "Where's my baby?"

Tripp looked up at her and smiled, "She's right here, with me."

"Give her to me," Jelly held out her paws. Tripp dropped the tiny ball of fluff into her palms.

Jelly ran the side of her face along its body. The whiskers on her face lit up, along with her daughter's. They fizzed and connected together, calming the kitten down.

She took a deep breath and looked at Tripp.

"Why aren't we moving?"

"The autopilot won't engage the thrusters."

"Take her," Jelly passed her newborn to Tripp and walked up to Manny, "Hey, *you*. Stupid book. Why won't you engage the thrusters?"

"Because it is not in my remit to take orders from strangers."

"Really?" Jelly marched over to the communications console. She knocked Jaycee out of her way and expanded her infinity claws at the screen, "You have five seconds to get us out of here or I'll rip your

guts out."

Manny shuffled in the air in an attempt to seem calm, "You can do that if you wish. It won't help."

Alex stepped forward. He knew what had to be done, "Manny?"

"Yes, Alex?"

"Captain Weller was killed on his mission. That makes me the captain, now."

Tripp, Jaycee, and Jelly turned to Alex with relief.

"Captain Weller is dead?" Manny asked.

"Yes, Jelly killed him. And Nutrene, and droids Poz and Neg."

"I see."

"Make no mistake. Anderson is in charge, now, after me. I hereby assign full captain privileges to Anderson in the event of anything happening to me. "

Manny froze in mid-air and drained the color from her book-body.

"You *will* take orders from us as we see fit. Do you understand what I've just said?"

"In that case I await your commands."

"Engage thrusters," Alex said. "Make up a course for Earth, please __"

"—Ngggggg," Jelly grunted in agony, inadvertently catching everyone's attention, "It's h-happening again."

Alex's eyes widened as he saw Jelly pushing her second baby out from between her legs, "Jesus."

A gush of transparent liquid fountained down her thighs.

"Stand back. Give her some space," Tripp said.

Opera Charlie rumbled to life as Jelly rolled onto her side. She arched her knee into the air and meowed at the top of her lungs, "My baby… it's c-coming…"

KER-RUUNNNCCCHHH!

The spacecraft shunted around, spilling the crew off their balance, "What's that?" Tripp screamed and clutched at the chair in front of the console.

Opera Charlie's back thrusters lit up and blasted away from Saturn's spectacular light show.

The bridge cracked and broke away from Opera Beta entirely. Huge clumps of white metal daggered out and tossed Opera Beta into a sustained revolution, like a Catherine wheel.

KERCHUNK-BOOM!

The bridge severed itself from both vessels and twirled in the air like a discarded bone.

Saturn's tumultuous ring revolved so fast it threatened to light up

the black whirlpool on its surface. The sound it produced was beyond deafening.

BLAST-BLAASSST!

Opera Charlie's thrusters lit up and sent the structure rocketing away from the planetary event literally unfolding behind them.

The nukes in Opera Beta's control deck detonated.

"Cover your faces. Don't look at the window." Jaycee stood in front of the flight deck windshield, "Beta's gonna blow—"

In an intense slowing down of motion, Tripp, Jaycee, Alex, and Jelly turned away from the windshield. Tripp covered the kitten's face with his palm as each of their faces bleached out into a mass of pure white…

KEERRR – WHUD-WHUD-WHUD-WHUDD-DD…

Opera Beta exploded in sections. The sharp-end of the cone rocketed away from the vessel like a bullet. A running detonation devastated its centrifuge, catapulting sections of its shell and insides into space. The middle of the ship rippled and blasted apart, pushing the thruster-end towards Saturn in a haze of destructed glory – enough of a blast to push Opera Charlie away as its thrusters roared into the huge blanket of space…

Jaycee and Tripp picked themselves up from the floor and looked up through the windshield.

Opera Beta and it inhabitants were no more.

A gigantic tear in the fabric of space discharged a shaft of white light that streaked all the way back to Saturn's core.

"She's gone," Tripp muttered, suppressing his emotion. He didn't dare look away, "They're all—"

"—*Dead*," Jaycee finished the sentence, "All of them."

Tripp double-took and passed the kitten to Alex, who took her into his arms.

"What am I meant to do with her?"

"Guard her with your life," Tripp made for the flight deck, "Manny? Tell me we're moving."

"Hyper-thrusters currently engaged," Manny said. "They've ten percent damage, however."

"Enough to get us back home?"

Manny went quiet.

The silence drew attention to Jelly on the floor kicking her legs and tensing her muscles, "My baby is coming."

"*Another* one?" Tripp ran over to her and held out his arms, "What do you need me to do?"

"Leave me the hell alone," Jelly squealed and clutched the

console edge, “Nggggg…”

“Excuse me, Tripp?” Manny sprang to life, “I’m afraid I have some good news and bad news.”

“What is it? Give me the good news first.”

“The thrusters are engaged at ninety-two percent. We have a better-than-good chance of making it home.”

“And the bad news? I mean, apart from Charlie about to acquire a litter of kittens?”

Manny projected a holograph in the middle of the room. Opera Charlie’s escape from Saturn had slowed it down, perilously close to being pulled back, “We may not leave Saturn’s orbit intact.”

“Oh, *great*.”

“Maximum capacity on the thrusters, please,” Alex looked at Manny as he comforted the kitten in his arms.

“We can’t outrun a black hole, Hughes.”

“Is that what that is? A black hole?”

“It resembles one. It’s not fully-formed yet. I’ll take my chances on outrunning it and not sticking around to find out.”

Manny threw a holographic projection of the engine’s view of Saturn. It folded out in the middle of the room and showed the giant planet shaking around like a blender at full speed.

“I’ll maximize the capability, but there are no guarantees. The force is threatening to pull us back in,” Manny said.

“Just do it. Full throttle.”

Jelly huffed and puffed. Her belly glowed a hot pink through her exo-suit top. She strained her stomach muscles and kicking her boots against the ground, “Oh, *God*… it’s coming, it’s coming…”

Tripp, Jaycee, and Alex looked at the holograph footage of Saturn as per the view from the back of the ship.

“If you believe in God, now’s the time to pray…” Tripp said, quietly.

The kitten shuffled around in his arms and meowed its first.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Port Lavaca

South Texas, USA

(Ten miles north of Port D'Souza)

The sun had set.

The only light provided on the road came from the occasional street lamp and the full moon.

An engine from a 4x4 rumbled beside one of many trees by the road.

Grace held her flashlight against the trees in a hunt for the escaped felines, "Here kitty-kitty-kitty. Where are you?"

A rectangular geo-scan hung above her flashlight. Several purple dots beeped as a blue radar swirled around. She held her finger to her ear and spoke into her mouthpiece.

"Siyam, they're here somewhere," she clocked a similar flashlight a few feet away.

"I know, I'm getting the same reading," Siyam responded through her headgear, "Two clicks further."

"I hope they're willing to come with us. I don't get it, they usually respond."

"It's unlike them to stay in packs. Usually they're—"

A rustling coming from a bush by the road stopped him talking. Grace grew nervous, "What was that noise?"

Siyam waved his flashlight around, "By the road. Highway thirty-seven. Move."

The trees seem to come to life as the pair turned around and made their way to the road.

A giant gale rustled the branches and blew Grace's hair back across her neck, "Hey, what's that noise?"

WHUDDA-WHUDDA-WHUDDA.

A deafening noise pushed the gale across their faces.

"Chopper. It's one of USARIC's," Siyam kept an eye on the purple blips on the his geo-scan as he ran over to Grace, "Look. Up there."

A fierce-looking black helicopter with tandem rotors hovered over the freeway and blasted its lights onto the road, "This is the United

States and Russian Intergalactic Confederation," a male voice announced through its speakers, "Make yourselves know immediately."

Grace turned to Siyam and exhaled, "That's it. We're busted."

He clutched her arm and held her back, "No, wait. I don't *think* they're talking to us."

The helicopter lowered. The blades of grass and dust kicked across the ground.

"I repeat, come out now and await rescue."

Grace tapped Siyam on the shoulder. She'd seen something crawl out of the bush by the stores.

"Look, over there."

"Oh, wow," Siyam gasped as he watch the Egyptian Mau bolt into the middle of the freeway.

Two cars blared their horns and screeched to a halt, narrowly avoiding contact with the cat.

She made herself comfortable in the middle of the road and looked up at the blinding light coming from the helicopter, "Meow."

"Good. Stay where you are," said a USARIC mercenary sitting at the opened door to the helicopter, "Where are the others?"

"Meow," Mau growled and looked at the floor.

"What is she doing?" Grace lowered her flashlight and stepped forward, "I'm going to take her—"

"—Christ's sake, *no*. They'll open fire on us. On *her*."

"We can't just leave her there," Grace whispered. "They'll take her back."

A chorus of 'meows' snaked through the trees. Several cats emerged and joined their leader on the road.

"That's right, you fluffy idiots," the USARIC mercenary said through his megaphone, "Out you come. Nice and slow."

Another merc pushed forward as the helicopter hovered to the liquor store's parking lot. He produced a mini gun and attached it to the frame of the hatch, "Just tell me when."

"Drivers," The merc said, "Exit your vehicles and make your way to the parking lot, please."

The drivers in each car jumped out and ran under a giant vertical billboard advertising *Rollneck Kojak* beer. A neon image of a bald-headed man blinked underneath its logo.

"Meow," The Egyptian Mau stood up and walked around in a circle, forcing her twenty-nine peers to stop moving. They sat on their haunches, randomly dotted all over the road.

Grace reached into her belt and retrieved her handgun, "They're *not* taking those cats and abusing them."

“Grace, don’t. Look at them, we’re outnumbered. We’re too late. They beat us to it.”

“I’ll take as many of those bastards out as I can,” Grace bit her lip to prevent herself from crying, “I don’t c-care if I die.”

Siyam grabbed her shoulder and sidled into her, “Well I do. You’re no use to any of us *dead*, are you?”

Grace lowered her gun, resigned to defeat.

“You wanna end up like Handax? Like Denny, Moses, and Leif? Then go out there and go down in a blaze of glory. Just know that you don’t have our blessing.”

She swiped his hand away from her shoulder and fell to her knees, “Let go of me.”

The helicopter’s landing gear hit the ground, kicking up a giant whirlwind of dust. The armed Mercenary jumped out and swung his machine gun at the Egyptian Mau, “There you are. Stay right there.”

He waved his colleague out of the vehicle.

“Get the net. Tell base we’ve located the rest of them.”

SNAAARRRLLLLL!

The Egyptian Mau looked up at the full moon along with her peers.

“Hey, you,” the merc shouted over the noise of helicopter’s rotors, “Stay where you are.”

His colleague hopped out of the helicopter with a giant net in his hands. He unraveled the ends and yanked them taut, “Ready to capture.”

The Egyptian Mau wasn’t impressed. She stood on all fours and showed the men her ass, and faced her peers. A tiny white spark erupted a few inches to the left of the moon, a billion miles away from Earth.

“Meow,” she cried.

All the cats howled with her. They turned to the mercenary as he aimed his gun at the Egyptian Mau.

“What are you doing?” he said with a heart full of fear, “It’s weird.”

“Meeeeooowww,” the Mau growled and scraped her paws on the gravel.

“Oh no… no-no-no…” Siyam eyes widened, “They’re *not* going to __”

“—*Jesus Christ*,” Grace held her breath.

A standoff occurred between the two men and the thirty cats, “Don’t anybody move or I’ll blow her damned head off,” he shouted, hoping the cats understood English.

They didn’t comprehend the instruction but knew a threat when they saw it. Now was the time to act.

“MEEEOOOOOOOWWW,” All thirty cats shrieked and launched toward the armed mercenary.

“No, get back!” He opened fire on the stampede of felines. A flurry of them trampled over the parked cars and cracked the windscreen as they bounded toward him.

The Egyptian Mau nodded the two white bobtails ahead.

BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!

The mercenary fired at the cats. The ones who didn’t get hit bolted towards him.

“Get back you vicious, little shi—”

ROOOWWAAAAARRRR!

“Look! They’re gonna kill him.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Siyam spluttered in amazement, “Keep back.”

The Egyptian Mau jumped into the air claws-first and punctured the mercenary’s visor. A jut of blood splattered up the inside. She dug her hind legs into his chest and ravaged his face, “Meow!”

Twelve cats ran up his trouser leg and jabbed their claws into his flesh, tearing bits of him apart. He screamed and fell to his knees in agony.

The two USARIC mercenaries ran back into the helicopter, “Get this bird back in the air. They’re killing him,” shouted one of them to the pilot.

The helicopter blades fired back up.

WHUM-WHUUUM-WHUUUUM…

The Egyptian Mau ran the top of her head against the mercenaries visor, lifted it over his head. His face was a bloodied mess.

She looked into his pupils and licked her lips.

“N-No, p-please,” he screamed as she dove into his face claws-first.

The helicopter’s gear lifted from the ground – taking ten cats with it. Half of them invaded the passenger seat area and tore the two mercenaries apart.

The other half – all ten of them – hopped into the pilot seat and ripped up the pilot’s legs and arms.

Grace ran into the road with her flashlight and watched the helicopter auto-rotate twenty feet in the air.

Large numbers of patrons from the liquor store and surrounding restaurants gathered at the window. Some of them ran out of the building and into the parking lot.

“Get back, get back!” Grace screamed at them, “The chopper’s gonna come down!”

A thrashing of meows and human screams came from the

spinning USARIC helicopter.

"Get back!" Grace shouted at the others as Siyam ran up behind her.

WHUDDA-WHUDDA-SLIP-CRASH-CRASH-CRASH!

The blades of the back rotors sliced against the *Rollneck Kojak* sign. Segments of it blasted in all directions, causing an electrical storm. The neon rendition of the bald man burst into flames and crashed against the ground.

The chopper hit the cement. The first rotor's blades stabbed into the side of the vehicle itself, pushing it onto its side.

WHIINNNEEE… KERRR-RASSSHHHH!

A dozen cats hopped out from the helicopter and landed on the road. They dispersed in all directions, howling and squealing at the night sky.

The patrons from the building ran in all directions, screaming. Some of them held their forearms and Viddy Media ink at the scene in an attempt to record what was happening.

"Are you crazy?" Grace shouted at those brave enough to film what was happening, "Get back."

The once-tiny white dot overseeing the event from the night sky fanned out like bubble by another inch.

The helicopter tumbled over and around, slamming the remainder of its blades against the floor. One of them caught the mercenary's legs and severed it from his thigh, "Gaaahh!"

The rest of the cats propelled from the sides of the helicopter and darted across the road, away from danger.

"Get out of there, now," Grace yelled at them.

SLAP-SLAP-SLAP-BAMMM.

The second rotor slowed to a halt. Its blades crunched against the ground.

The mercenaries inside crashed to the ground, unconscious.

Grace and Siyam dared not move any closer for fear of the vehicle going up in flames.

"Quick, we gotta gather up all the cats and get them out of here."

Grace peered forward and noticed something shuffling in the tilted cockpit, "Wait, what's that?"

A paw.

Then a furry arm.

Two flapping ears of an Egyptian Mau.

She clambered over the lip of the door and bolted toward Grace and Siyam, "Meow."

"Hey, girl," Grace crouched down and held out her arms, "We're here to rescue you. How did you do *that*?"

The Mau lifted her paw and licked her claw. A shiny, white

cuticle – made of titanium.

Grace gasped and tied to process what she'd seen. She turned to the other cats to find that they had the same contraption fitted to their paws.

"Oh, wow. They're all—"

"—Meeooww," The Mau ran her claws against the ground,

The helicopter's final blade hit the cement.

KA-BLAAAA-AAA-AAAMMM!

It exploded with such force that its charcoaled body launched thirty feet into the air and exploded a second time.

A slab of fiery helicopter slammed down on both cars, bursting their windows.

Grace and Siyam didn't know how to respond. She looked at the Mau in shock.

"Miew."

"Umm," Grace cleared her throat, "Let's get you and your friends out of here. *Right now*…"

Chrome Valley

United Kingdom

Jamie Anderson pulled his rucksack over his shoulders. He crossed the main road that separated Chrome Valley's east and west side.

A swarm of chuckling school children ran past and ignored him.

"Ugh, there's Lame-y Anderson," one of the chubby kids cackled at his excited friends, "His cat lost the competition."

"Yeah," squealed an excited girl, "A giant loser, just like her ugly owner."

"Lame-y Anderson, Lame-y Anderson," all the kids chanted in unison as they ran off around the corner.

"Shut up," he muttered

He knew in his heart of hearts that it was only a matter of time before he'd become famous. Everyone would know Jelly won. Maybe *then* they'd like him.

Until then he'd continue to be the loner. On one hand, it suited him. He enjoyed the privacy. On the other, having no friends was a lonely prospect.

No one to talk to.

It wasn't long before he turned the same corner near the Waddling Gate cemetery. He and his mother buried his late father

there nearly six years ago.

He couldn't bear to look at the black gates, nor the church standing behind it. The very sight alone upset him. Worse, he had to walk past it twice a day to and from school.

Jamie looked at his Viddy Media ink. 8:10 am.

Plenty of time to make the start of school and his first period.

He looked up to see the chubby kid pant and wheeze further up the road, trying to keep up with his friends.

"One day, Raymond," Jamie stopped walking. He muttered and scowled, quietly, "I'll kick your fat arse into the moon."

A screeching of tires came a few feet behind him. He turned around and saw a black van spin onto the road at speed.

"Pfft. *Whatever*."

He kept his head down and watched each foot pace in front of the other. It was hard for him to *not* notice the engine and wheels slowing down behind him. as he walked along the sidewalk.

The van crawled to a steady three miles per hour.

Jamie looked over his shoulder and squinted at the windshield. Its darkened, limousine effect prevented him from seeing the driver. The reflection of the trees from the cemetery were the only thing visible on the surface of the windshield.

He resumed his journey to school.

The van did the same.

Jamie knew the van was following him.

"Ugh, no," Jamie looked at the cemetery gates and grew anxious. He could jump the railings and run across the grounds to safety.

The van slammed on its brakes, startling the boy.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

The side door slid open and revealed a person in a black balaclava. She grabbed the lip of the door and held her head out, "Jamie Anderson?"

He kept his mouth shut and chose not to interact with the stranger.

"Ugh, don't mess me around, you little turd," the person said. A feminine voice, to be sure. Judging by her voice and svelte frame she couldn't have been very old, "Are *you* Jamie Anderson?"

"Who's asking?"

"It's him," yelled a masked man from behind the door. Jamie scrunched his face at the woman.

She produced a gun and lay it across her lap, "Jamie?"

"P-Please leave me alone."

"Jamie Anderson?"

"My mom told me never to speak to strangers."

The woman wasn't interested in his excuses. She lifted the gun

and traced her finger along the barrel, “I know it’s you, but I need to be sure. What’s your date of birth?”

He hoped she wouldn’t point the gun at him, “March tenth, twenty-one-twelve.”

“Yes, it’s you all right,” she said.

Jamie blinked, frozen on the spot. He didn’t dare move a *muscle*, “What do you want?”

The woman shifted her behind across the seat the van and patted the vacant space next to her, “Get in.”

From the author – Andrew Mackay

Author notes from Star Cat 3: War Mage (exclusive to the e-book version of this title)

Hey, gang!

I'll admit, I struggled a bit with Star Cat 3. It wasn't because I didn't have any ideas, but because I know how expansive the story is getting – and is going to be. Keeping a tally of the sheer numbers of characters involved and places and events, and when they happened requires its own encyclopedia (if you're under the age of thirty, an encyclopedia was like a big book with the history of everything in it. They took all the info and put it where you go to do your last-minute homework; Wikipedia.) I'm sure reading the series is exhausting. Try carrying it around in your head! And we're only half way there lol

I mentioned in the author notes for Pink Symphony that the series is inspired by the sci fi movies I saw in the 80s when I was growing up. Some of the more seasoned film fanatics among you may well have clocked the Alien, Aliens, Robocop, The Thing, 2001: A Space Odyssey references. These are all deliberate. It's clear to me now that we're up to book 3 that Star Cat is playing out like a *greatest hits* mix tape of all the sci-fi I love. Especially the titles that affected me when growing up. The real test of the series will be whether or not I can juggle everything that is happening in space *and* back on Earth.

I think there will be six books in this series **unless** it's a super sell-out mega blockbuster. In which case, I'll explore the idea even further. Time will tell, but I have three more books in mind after War Mage.

War Mage is somewhat *beyond* sci-fi in my eyes. I mentioned last time that, in my view, good sci-fi raises more questions than it answers. In addition to this I've decided sci-fi needs to be way, way more than just fiction regarding science. Sure, all the Poz and Neg Bass / Death Drone / Individimedia / Decapidisc technology is fun, but it's the *characters* where we find ourselves really hooked.

This time, for War Mage, the theme was really about identity and conformity. Jelly is the equivalent of a full-grown woman by the end of War Mage. It was an area of drama I really wanted to explore; specifically, the aspect of an animal trying its utmost to conform to the expectations of her crew, and failing in most cases. I refer exclusively to the part where Wool trains Jelly to *not* do something – knock the cups off the desk. It's a part that foreshadows Bonnie's death. Jelly technically murdered Bonnie Whitaker – but, if you think about it, did she *really*? She was only playing to her instincts. At that point, being little more than a jumped-up adolescent, it's hardly fair to say Jelly *murdered* her. Therein lies the quandary.

This idea of cats acting on instinct came about from a conversation I had with my mum about twenty years ago when I still lived at home. We had a number of cats over the years. Usually two at a time, swearing blind that once they'd passed away, that would be the end of it. The heartbreak when the inevitable rolled round was too much to bear. Anyway, I asked my mum what would happen if Sooty (our black cat at the time) were to outgrow us. Could he be trusted? My mum said she didn't think so. I am sure we all like to think our pets wouldn't turn on us if they were to outgrow us in size. But in our heart of hearts, I think we all know they would. Hell, even if they were being friendly and slapping us around for the lolz, they could do irreparable – even fatal – damage.

I wasn't especially conscious of the conversation while I wrote War Mage. By the time I got to the part where Jelly awakens from hyper-sleep at a whopping seven feet in height, and tells Jaycee to bow down, it all came flooding back. I don't know about you, but I find that stuff fascinating. I find people and their behaviour in certain situations fascinating. I guess that's part and parcel of having been a screenwriter and a teacher for most of my adult life – before turning to writing novels. I hope, further, that you as a reader have found the areas I'm exploring just as fascinating.

Incidentally, I'd like to say sorry to all of you who loved Bonnie, Tor, Baldron, Manuel, and Wool. War Mage was a bit of a bloodbath. But, when my characters die, they stay dead, I'm afraid. There's no point hiding the fact that people, and animals, die. I think it's a part of the reason why we get pets in the first place. They're cute and cuddly and great, but the very end does set in stone a principal – especially

for children – that all things come to an end. Some of the best works of fiction deal with loss in an appropriate way. We all need to be reminded to not take what we have for granted once in a while.

At the very crux of it all, War Mage has taken us on a journey a billion miles from the starting point. Remember when Jelly Anderson was just a little kitty with her friend, Jamie? Whoa, look at her now… also, before you ask, I am well aware of the things that have not been explained. Perhaps I should tell you now that everything you've read in all three books so far has been important. But I would never, ever presume to spell things out for you – and certainly not in this genre. If you're still wondering *how* Jelly got pregnant then I'm afraid you're asking the wrong question. Think along the lines of *why* and you'll reach the answer a lot quicker. For those of you who "get it" – then I am glad. I've received a lot of communication since Pink Symphony's release thanking me for not treating them like idiots. It's been my pleasure.

Now, we move on to Star Cat 4: Killer Instinct. If you thought War Mage was rough… prepare yourselves. It'll still be Harry Potter / PG-13 levels of violence. But by now you *know* I'm ruthless. So adjust your expectations accordingly, boys and girls. Don't worry, there'll be many OMG and fist pumping moments. Every book needs to up the ante. Killer Instinct will blow your cotton socks off.

Just as the next move as been unpredictable (in most cases, anyway) from one book to the next – so, too, will Killer Instinct. It'll be a completely different departure. I can only write – and you can only read – a bridge connection exploding between two spaceships so many times, and people unmasking themselves as villains and/or good guys before I start to belabor the point. The title may give the direction away, but I can assure you that the themes will be fresher than a recently-picked dandelion. Also, the events on Earth (if you haven't figure it out yet with War Mage's ending lol) is really starting to ramp up. I'm sure the more astute reader may see where all that stuff is heading. I cannot resist satire. If you've read *any* of my other works, then you'll know this. But, you know what they say – it's not the being there, but the *getting there* that's the most fun.

My family can eat and wear shoes because readers such as yourself are good enough to buy my books and provide me with a living. I must entertain you, and provide you with compelling stories. I will continue to not let you down. If anything, the opposite. Because Star Cat is enjoying considerable success, it's forcing me to write faster and better. As you've seen up until this point I'm trying to cover a number of bases and give you something you haven't seen before. Sure, it's silly sci fi nonsense – but is it, really? If you Google "Saturn Moon as All the Ingredients for Life" you'll find a new story dated

June 28th that suggests NASA has found evidence that Enceladus could contain life. I wrote Star Cat: Infinity Claws two months before this story broke. How strange is that?

Sometimes our crazy and daft predictions can come true. If we think back to the technology of 1918, just after WWI, what did we have then? The telephone? And even then it was a plastic piece of crap that had dials and so on. Look what we have today. Televisions, cars, planes, video games, smart phones… where will we be in 2118? Or even 2122, as it is now in the Star Cat series? It's a fascinating question – and a damn shame we'll never live to see the answer. Maybe one day cats will compete – for something. Maybe not to go into space. Or *maybe*? I dunno.

My hope is that one day a hundred years from now, someone digs up the Star Cat series and reads it (because I am really famous and clever, like Shakespeare's novels and Dickens's plays and stuff) and says "Oh, you know that Mackay guy? He got some stuff right. And there are *still* no flying cars."

See you at the end of book 4!

Andrew Mackay,
Hampshire, UK
(June 28, 2018)

* * *

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Up next: Star Cat 4: Killer Instinct

Beyond the stars.
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Discover how it all began…

Star Cat: Origins

Young Jamie Anderson's world is turned upside down by tragedy.

But a new character is about to enter his life and change it forever.

A little cat named Jelly.

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